DUMMY OF DEATH By LEROY YERXA

fantastic ADVENTURES

OCTOBER 25¢
IN CANADA 30¢

KING OF THE DINOSAURS

By J. W. PELKIE

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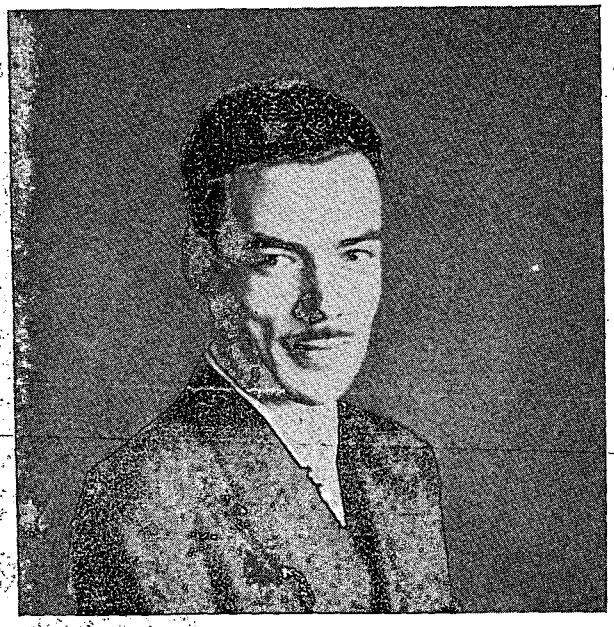
MEET the AUTHORS

Presenting the Creator of "King of the Dinosaurs"

J. W. PELKIE



Mrs. Pelkie's Favorite Son

A FEW years ago my ticker decided life should be more interesting so instead of going tick-tock it would occasionally go tock-tick. Our family physician took soundings and told me to sit down and stay there—which is boring. So to kill the monotony, I started to write—in pencil. This didn't work, so we snagged an abandoned antique of a typewriter from a hock shop—and went after the Big Money. Yeah!

We? Oh, that's Mom and I! It's been Mom and I ever since I was born. I don't do anything without Mom. In fact, I don't dare! That's why her picture is as big as mine in this confession. Well, anyway, we began saving box tops, labels, wrappers, etc. and writing snappy entries for contests. I would send in an entry and Mom would send in an entry. I would get zero, Mom would get a washing machine or refrigerator. A guy can take second seat to his Mom just so long—so in order to get a "first" I wrote a novel about Dinosaurs. Mom doesn't know about Dinosaurs. . . .

Your editor teased me with "Got any more?" Well, I like to write 'em, so could anything be more cozy? Mom was delighted. In order to make my triumph even greater, she gentled me into cleaning the apartment once a week. Now she's teaching me to make beds. So, she says, she can hire me out to help relieve the maid shortage, or "My, won't you make some lucky girl a fine housekeeper!" There are times when I suspect that Mom of mine.

Mom and I live in Butte, Montana, the richest hill on Earth, the Treasure State, the Sportsman's Paradise, the Vacationist's Shangri-La, the Land of Opportunity, where men are Men and women are . . . what more do you want, Chamber of Commerce!

I've spent some time on ranches around here. I've traveled some, but not as much as I intend to. I like to read and listen to the radio. I like to meet people and learn their point of view and add their information to mine. And most lately, I like to write for FANTASTIC ADVENTURES.

Oh yes, the J is for Joe, the W for Walter, and Pelkie is Pel-kay. Just so you'll know how to pronounce it on the other two Dinosaur yarns I've also written and sold to your editor!

Mr. Pelkie's "Mom"—and Inspiration

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Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

THE editors of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES are pleased to present something new to the readers with this issue—the first of a series of stories by a gentleman named Pelkie which we think is really something to call entertainment! All of us, we're sure, like Walt Disney's cartoons. Well, here's a novel that you might call "in the Disney manner"! "King Of The Dinosaurs" is 75,000 words of delightful fantasy, of smashing adventure, and subtle satire that will satisfy you as no fantasy has in recent years. Here, at last, is a writer who has the "gift" of a Burroughs, in a new guise. We predict he will go far. At least, you can be sure of at least two more grand stories of this type coming up. They are already safely in our files.

A RATHER chilling tale is Leroy Yerxa's latest, "Dummy Of Death." It has a new twist to the fantasy about the ventriloquist's dummy who comes to life. We think you'll like it.

NOTICE

EFFECTIVE with this issue, *Amazing Stories* will appear in a 176-page format. This action has become necessary due to the war paper shortage. However, in order to keep the fiction content of the magazine at a high point, all contracts for advertising have been cancelled. The space thus provided will be devoted to fiction.

WHEN William Lawrence Hamling (who we are proud to say has become a pretty fair-haired boy of ours) brought in his latest short titled "Bag and Baggage" we were delighted. Here's a story that you might call a graduation paper—it's really expert stuff, and a beautiful fantasy idea!

RICHARD CASEY is back again with one of those little "mystic" tales that always proves to be a top-rank title on the contents page so far as the reader is concerned, so whenever one turns up we grab it. "Fingerprints Of Fear" has that little spine-tickling quality that you want.

TO close up this issue, we present another new writer, a chap who obviously knows his stuff, although we confess we never heard of him before. He's Geoff St. Reynard, and he wrote a beautiful little piece called "Through A Dead Man's Eyes." It is good fantasy.

TO those of you who may have read some of the stories by Richard S. Shaver, in our companion magazine, *Amazing Stories*, the illustrated feature by the famous artist, J. Allen St. John, on our inside back cover ought to prove interesting. It is a factual feature, and tells of a mysterious lost race whose origin, history, and fate have been entirely forgotten. It is also proof of the fact that there actually were giants on the earth in those days!

ALTHOUGH we have a 32-page cut in contents, actually there is less than 5,000 words of fiction dropped from the book, due to the dropping of the ads. This policy will continue until the magazines resume full-size publication. Our intentions are to return to post-war monthly publication, and to run the book as big as the presses will take—or almost twice as thick as at present. And that may be soon!

WE want to inform you that our sister magazine, *Air Adventures* is due to reappear after an absence of four years. In fact, the date is July 31, 1945. This should be interesting to you fans for one reason—the famous science fiction and fantasy artist, James B. Settles, has done some of the most marvelous water-color covers we have ever seen, and you'll want especially to see the back cover.

SOME of you may remember a news item of some years ago relating how a 100-ton dredge floated up into the air, drifted lazily over a high levee, and then settled unconcernedly in the middle of a field—all in contemptuous disregard of Newton's laws, and Einstein's concepts. Your editor recently contacted the engineer in charge of the dredge at the time of the incident, and he checked the matter carefully. Naturally, it would not be feasible to ask Mr. Newton how come, and Einstein could not answer if he would—but we do want to point out that anyone who disclaims any of the weird science we sometimes use in FANTASTIC ADVENTURES ought not to quote Newton and Einstein in refutation of that weird science! This dredge affair proves that Newton's laws do not account for all known phenomena of gravitation—and therefore quite reasonably could be in error; and gravity not "attraction of Mass" at all. *Rap.*

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ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.

All STORIES Complete

KING OF THE DINOSAURS
(Novel—75,000) ..... By J. W. Pelkie 6
Illustrated by Seward

There were two strange things in this world of cave men and dinosaurs—the precious berries that made men strong beyond all belief; and the dinosaurs' passionate fondness for baseball!

THROUGH A DEAD MAN'S EYES
(Short—3,480) ..... By Geoff St. Reynard 68
Illustrated by Brady

It was only a human skull, but through the hollow sockets of its eyes a mysterious world of the past could be seen. What did it all mean? And what great danger could the skull hold?

BAG AND BAGGAGE
(Short—2,400) ..... By William Lawrence Hamling 76
Illustrated by Rod Ruth

It is a rather common tragedy of married life in which the husband reaches the stage where he calls his wife a "bag." In this particular case it so happened that he was quite correct. . . .

FINGERPRINTS OF FEAR
(Short—3,000) ..... By Richard Casey 82
Illustrated by Dunkley

In the mind of man there are strange things that do not answer to the laws that govern our everyday life. It seems he is capable of visioning a world beyond the range of his senses.

DUMMY OF DEATH
(Novelet—10,000) ..... By Leroy Yerxa 90
Illustrated by Rod Ruth

It was a great act—the ventriloquist became the dummy and the dummy . . . Well, the dummy wasn't alive, but somehow there were words spoken on that stage that were not in the prepared script!

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Front cover painting by J. Allen St. John, illustrating a scene from "King of the Dinosaurs"
Back cover painting by Frank R. Paul, illustrating the series, "Stories of the Stars"

OCTOBER 1945

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KING OF THE

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DINOSAURS

Toka picked himself up from the mud and gripped his axe for a new assault on the maddened beast

By J. W. PELKIE

Everybody loves ball games; but who wants to play the part of the ball—especially if the players are dinosaurs!

LIKE all his kind, Toka possessed acutely superior reflexes and senses of perception. Therefore, from his central location, he was automatically aware of the deployment of every one of his party throughout the camouflaging green and yellow and brown of this hugely sprawling thicket; aware of their every movement and every hoarsely whispered word; aware of every other sound and lack of sound. Too, a corner of his mind pictured the position.

The underfooting here: a yellow-brown mulch, the dank of its rottenness rising unpleasantly into the nostrils. This concealing thicket, midway along the east shore: but little less oppressively hot than other swampy tangles recently traversed. Throats and lips seeming only to parch the more at the scene viewed from here: the shrinking blue expanse of the Hop-toad—more familiarly, the Hop. Far

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off down there to the left, beyond the edging jungle, the Big Brown: a muddied river rolling along through the center of the valley, giving off an undertoning throb that would really be noticed only were it suddenly absent.

But another sound, rolling from not too far away southwest: a constantly rising and falling surf of excited babblings and roarings, slappings and thumpings. This second accumulation of sounds had been innocent too —once. The present surf of it was not so depressing; this time, three of Kola's spies had been maneuvered into being caught. If only those three would be enough till——

But Toka hoped again that his carefully unruffled manner concealed his anxiety, concealed his now faintly twinging conscience. Perhaps this disturbing twinging was because he had yet to take a human life. He'd have to overcome that feeling, soon.

Toka turned a corner of his mind to Nicky and Noola. No doubt, if successful, those two would find a certain satisfaction in completing the task they had so promptly taken on themselves. He found himself hoping with a strange fervency that the brothers would be successful in the extreme.

Then his anxiety returned. There was, of course, no avoiding the need for concealing The Plan at any cost; too many good lives were at stake. But Nicky and Noola, withal their half-humorous and half-serious manner, were exceptional leaders and commanders, were the best next to Rok.

Toka's troubled thoughts calmed as two familiar lean hulks, red-headed battle-axes in hand, silently materialized from the jungle shadows to his left rear and were back in the thicket. Nicky and Noola took up their former positions, side by side, a short four paces to the left of Rok.

"Well?" rasped Rok's parched voice.

Broad smiles of satisfaction spread further over the homely faces. Toka read it there: bottomless potholes gulped no tales; the elders of Nicky and Noola had been at least partially avenged. The Plan was still protected.

"No sign o' two more rats tailin' us —now," rasped Nicky.

Rok smiled faintly in approval, relaxed and faced forward again. There was yet some hope.

TOKA sensed the rest of the party relax, but relax not quite so fully as they should. But intelligence warned that this waiting, waiting so chafing to the avenging spirit, so tensing to the fighting nerves had to be; precipitous action from this point on could easily ruin The Plan.

But again all the party was as before it had detected the tailers. Bony right hand on the butt of his stone-headed battle-ax, Rok, second in command, was again resting his lank rangy body. The some two hundred and fifty others of the party strategically scattered, were also resting and waiting, most in various other poses, for there were not some two hundred fifty other battle-ax handles to put cane-like to hard muscled tan right thighs; the scant half dozen of the dark red stone battle-heads were here, half sunk into the slimy underfooting.

Toka sensed the party awaiting the reports of the scouts. He himself was no less impatient for word from them: two, unarmed and invisible in the drooping green crown of the great palm towering from this thicket; three more pairs, unarmed, who should likewise be posting themselves elsewhere. But Toka retained his calm manner, remained automatically aware of every man here, of every action, of every sound.

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With free left hand Rok suddenly sent glistening sweat beads from solidly square features. Rok, bony but powerful, keen-minded; naturally beardless, like them all.

Now some one was trying to be casually hopeful. The parched voice rasped in the throbbing silence. "Hope we find enough." This was again the thought spurring the minds of all. Several of the party answered with a nervous, "Unnhh."

The fluttering call of a bird no longer found in the area suddenly came twice from out of the jungle edge at the lower end of the Hop. Alert, Rok quickly cupped a hand to his mouth, answered twice, short, sharp. Then the impatience mounted another notch, and all eyes continued restlessly roving around the Hop. There was an undenied tension in the crowd.

Toka made his mind relax by considering again the phenomenon of this lake. In even measure with the sun's ascent to midday the Hop, though generously fed by a small brook, mysteriously shrank daily to near its present size: irregularly eight hundred paces wide and sixteen hundred long. Then, in even measure with the sun's descent from midday to western setting, it rose and expanded to near double its present size and remained constant overnight. At its highest it fingered into the lower lying sections of the edging jungle and freshened motionless pools and the watery surfaces of bottomless, hungrily gulping, tawny-slimed potholes. Now, near its shrunkenest, it was irregularly encircled by a broad and slippery smooth black ooze shore. Even directly across, midway on the west, where the jungle swelled forward to indent it, the shore narrowed steeply a full two hundred paces wide. Here, midway on the east, the shore stretched its flat widest, easily four hundred paces. The other side was the safest, most used—depleted; this side was the most dangerous least used—perhaps not depleted. But one had to take chances.

TOKA'S thoughts were interrupted by the sharply fluttering bird call as it came three times from out the jungle edge at the upper—the north—end of the Hop. Rok promptly answered. Then the mounting impatience of all was again voiced with a grated, "Just got to be some out there."

Rok's keen brown eyes, in hollowed sockets broadly separated by a longly generous nose above a wide mouth now firmed tight, sought and met Toka's keen brown eyes an instant in automatic query. Toka quirked an eyebrow in an answering flicker. Rok half smiled, returned his eyes to roving the lake, its shore and the jungle edging it.

Toka remained standing, resting on the butt of his battle-ax handle. To one watching, Toka appeared physically relaxed with a certain natural grace and quiet confidence. Rok and the others were equally lithe, equally lank, had equally heavy heads of shoulder-length black hair. They also possessed, but in a more nervous way, something of Toka's surface calmness.

Toka could sense some one readying to voice that sapping impatience again. Toka said: "We should find one or two berries, boys. You know no one has tried picnicking out there for at least a couple of months now."

Grating chuckles answered with equally wry humor.

"Yes, the berries are out there," he rasped again, with what he hoped was easy confidence, —"and we'll get them."

Toka saw his psychology rewarded. Rok as well as the others smiled broadly. The strength-capping tension slackened visibly.

As he waited and rested himself and

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his party further, Toka again turned an angle of the conditions. It was as if a retributive curse had fallen over the area. This whole north side of the valley, the only part even remotely safe any more, had been hunted till it was now barren even of the gay plumage and songs of bird life; and as if in hurt and revenge even the riotous colorings and heavy perfumes of flowers, with which this area was once so rich were no more. Leaves and grasses, at best tasteless and only smally nourishing, were practically all that remained in the nature of food. Even the insect life, some not only a treat to the taste but slightly nourishing, had all but disappeared. The great hopping toads, from which the Hop got its name, had long ago been hunted into extinction. Even the tepid but clear pure waters of the Hop had months ago been fished clean. And now the Hop's whole shore seemingly was exhumed of those amazingly vitalizing and prized of delicacies, the meaty black water berries which grew on strangely contracting vines just under the surface of the ooze, but only near the water line of maximum ebb. For six weeks not a berry had been found. There was famine all around.

Toka corrected himself, not without humor. For six weeks not a berry had been turned in.

The fluttering call came four times from the jungle edge directly across the Hop. Rok answered and the party stirred expectantly.

CHAPTER II

THE sun was almost directly overhead now, the Hop near its lowest, the shore near its widest, most promising. Toka sensed the spark that went through the party as, imitating him, all came fully erect, leaned forward and began peering systematically and even more sharply around the shore and its edging jungle.

To Toka's nod, Rok cupped hand to mouth and gave the fluttering bird call, one long. From overhead the call promptly echoed once; from down the far south end of the Hop twice; from the upper north end three times; from west, directly across, four times. That was the correct signal.

"All clear, Toka," said Rok.

"They may need a new ball any moment." Toka paused for emphasis, then quietly pointed out, "We need only a few thousand more berries and . . ."

Rok and the visible others only quickly smiled broad acknowledgement.

Toka stolidly faced forward a moment, swallowed. Of course they would follow wherever he led; for long months they had; he'd picked them for that. But likely not all would return from this venture, either.

Toka centered on the task at hand, readied himself. The battle-axes held expertly loose, he and his shadows, one after another behind him, stepped from the thicket. Toka knew every starved cable-like muscle and every supersharp faculty were alert, belying the perfect picture of hopelessness and utter weariness given to anyone watching from a distance. As his party stood there, Toka automatically took it in further: a ragged line in front the long thicket, the sun blasting down as a hot weight on already deeply tanned bodies, almost too-lean bodies. From head to foot all were clothed as he, only in scarcely adequate swatches of tattered goatskin strategically held in place with knotted strings of goat gut. From the scant half dozen imperfectly balanced battle-ax heads, dull-edged on one end and broad and innocently flat on the other, splotches of sunlight listlessly reflected.

The shore and the jungle edging re-

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mained seemingly innocent, the sharp fluttering calls repeated reassuringly. Yet Toka knew the party remained ever as alert as he as they hurriedly dragged forward with him and out across the warm and slippery smooth ooze. Nearing the water's edge they suddenly entered upon a long narrow area if intricate ridgings on the ooze, sign of berry vines. But all excitement was repressed. Their lives were in danger otherwise.

AT THE Hop's very edge all quickly deployed and began crawling systematically about. They were crouched over low, were clawing carefully yet swiftly and dexterously, were following and turning out the intricately looping ridgings. The strategy was claw from lowest ebb out and the strangely, suddenly contrasting vines and their berries couldn't escape back under water.

Toka saw with fascination that every one of the party kept his back turned to the north. And all remained alert, and the few with battle-axes kept them ever handy. Sweat came beading even more profusely on working bodies and was baked dry.

After a silence of scant moments, broken only by the scraping sounds of clawing, the first berry was found, then another, and more, and yet more. But as from the moment of stepping from the thicket no emotion was displayed, nothing to tell any distant watcher there was anything but hopelessness and mounting disgust over another fruitless searching. Toka well knew hunger was knotting stomachs. Yet no berries were eaten, but each one was carefully destemmed. Then, as the finder ran a bony hand in feigned manner through his head of long hair that hung down to the ooze, the berry was cleverly tied therein. Under the great success, though, tongues naturally loosened, and now and then a quick drink was taken from the Hop. But the work went ahead with undiminished speed. Everything counted on time.

Toka and Rok had paired off near each other. Not far away were the irrepressibles, Nicky and Noola. No matter how grave the situation, Nicky and Noola were never really glum for long. Their recent success on Kola's spies had lightened their spirits even more. The two were conversing in their inimitable jargon. His frequent glances passing over the brothers, Toka listened as he worked. Occasionally he was forced to smile at the idioms. Nicky's homely features began struggling in unaccustomed thought.

"If only them big Snakes hadn't got to runnin' off with everybody," he pondered to his brother. "I jest can't figger it out why the old things suddenly changed so."

Noola, equally irregular of feature, merely grunted a noncommittal, "Me neither." He then looked up, glanced warily about and crawled a short distance to a new ridging and resumed clawing.

After following up a very profitable ridging and moving up beside brother Noola, Nicky added, "Usta be kinda fun watchin' 'em—when they used hunks of swamp sod fer old apples."

Busy following up his new ridging, Noola replied, "Yeah, Nicky lad, it's gettin' so's a guy's life jest ain't worth a flyin' lizard's tail feather—an' them old flying things just ain't got no feathers."

TOKA saw with satisfaction that everyone's head was fast being heavily loaded. This section of the shore was proving unusually rich in the precious berries. The catch had already run at least ten thousand. But there couldn't be too many when the time came. The success of this daring

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hunt made it hard for one to feign the necessary hopelessness, disgust and weariness. Listening to Nicky and Noola helped, though.

"Yeah," continued Noola, "and when the old things comes swaddlin' an' grinnin' up to the plate an' winds up that long old tail they all got, an' then rares back an' lays on old apple, well . . ."

"Yeah," said Nicky, "even if a guy ain't homered clean inta the next country, the wear an' tear gets him inside an innin' or two."

"An' when the poor old apple loses his bounce . . ."

"Yeah," said Noola. "Them crazy old things jest bats him south outa sight an' starts lookin' around for a new old apple."

"Yeah," agreed Nicky bitterly. He slapped down a handful of ooze in unfeigned disgust. "An' the old things are gettin' worser all the time!"

Without looking up, Noola wagged his berry-laden head disconsolately. "Yeah, Nicky lad, they are usin' up a lot of old apples in this latest series."

"Yeah," growled Nicky. "Gettin' so's a guy hardly dares stick his dome out the door anymore."

Still clawing and feigning weariness and disgust, Nicky and Noola gave up the strenuous efforts of mental application and said nothing more.

CHAPTER III

FEELING he should display more sadness to attract the inevitable watchers' attentions to himself, Toka stopped clawing, straightened up, visibly let out a sigh, turned and sat back on his lean hard haunches. He let his eyes wander up across the north end of the Hop, up and over the motionless brown-green top of the jungle to the red cliff rising from the north brow of the valley.

The structure was sheer on either side, and on the invisible rear, as Toka well knew, it also shot sheer, from a gouged and guttered red-and-black-rocked desolation. Barren red low hills browed the valley east and west from massive upthrusting. Under the rays of the burning sun the cliff shimmered as if formed of fire. In frontal shape it was a giant's twenty-six-step stairway into the blue: broad and level and balustraded cutback terrace upon terrace angled abruptly skyward from the jungle, a jungle which thinned into short-grassed spongy clearings as it gently hillocked up to the cliff's base and embraced it halfway back on either side. Each terrace was trisected and connected to the next above by two balustraded stairways projecting parallel from the back wall. The stairway system made twin geometrical zigzag lines from terraces. One to Twenty-five.

The cliff proper ended in a full-length high stone wall and drain just above terrace Twenty-five to become a rocky park in the fore center and then a surrounding weird jumble of narrow twisting defiles and ridges rising to rocky spires, jagged and red. This Topland was reached by a lone stairway, rising from the center of Twenty-five, rising directly up and back into the cliff and onto the park. The stairway was closed with a black wood gate on the upper end. But the Topland was only seemingly barren; there was vegetation, though scant and fed only by infrequent but deluging rains. And over the weird jumble roamed and thrived large herds of long-wooled goats.

But these goats were no longer for the benefit of all, nor were the many articles derived from the twice-a-year processing that took place within the several open-faced low buildings grouped on the

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back of that small park, which stretched east and west from some hundred paces and some thirty back from the wall above Twenty-five.

Toka's eyes wandered back down to that first rise of the cliff, sheer from the jungle clearing. At the east corner of its base bubbled forth the clear cool spring that became the brook feeding the Hop. Two evenly spaced strings of willow ladders vertically trisected the first rise. Each string of ladders was made up of twenty lengths tied flexibly end to end, each length that of two men. Immediately above, on terrace Two, and slightly to the outside of each ladder, were two sling elevators for terrace One. Toka also knew their construction well. Short palm-trunk booms were fixed flush with the surface of terrace Two and projected out over terrace One. The rope of each elevator was of strongly woven fibrous rushes, and unwound from the wooden winch on terrace Two and out through a greased slot in the end of the boom to become a sling that was now tied back onto One, out of the way.

But terrace One did not have the only elevators. Now upright in the two evenly spaced roofless recesses that were well above head height back over terrace Twenty-five, were two tremendous vertically movable booms and their masts. The slings from these booms were tied out of the way in each recess. The back and sides of each recess were part of the wall above Twenty-five, and in each recess was located the pair of winches for the operation of each elevator. All four elevators, the pair of Twenty-five and the two of terrace One, were now for the entitled few only. The two ladders and four elevators and pair of stair systems were on two vertically trisecting lines; the pair of elevators on One, however, set slightly wider, to allow clearances for the slings of Twenty-five to reach terrace One unobstructed.

TOKA played his eyes further over the first rise. In great six-man-high letters was chiseled the word, SANDCLIFF. Once two dozen months back, nearly ten happy and healthy thousands had been dwelling within Sandcliff's cool and, at that time snug, interior. Now, except for a ruling hundred men and their childless women, and the equally ruthless warrior followers and patrols, numbering some odd thousands, the inhabitants numbered no more than three thousand, a thousand serving as slaves to the eleven hundred. Every setting sun found this oppressed three thousand more wan and their ranks further thinned, thinned in many ways other than by losses on the daily hunts. A few of the three thousand were to be seen now, going wearily about on the terraces below the topmost five. Some were carrying huge red clay urns of water drawn up from the spring. Waste was thrown off the east end of any terrace, but only by coming down to the west end of the terrace One with their urns did the people of Sandcliff obtain fresh water. Noosing a rope around the long neck of the urn and lowering the vessel into the large spring, they let it fill, then carefully hoisted it back, hand over hand.

On the very center of Twenty-four, the terrace of the immense court capable of seating all Sandcliff's normal population, the main speaking drum was a brown disk, three men in diameter facing south. On every terrace there were small speaking drums, set in the outer corner formed by the balustrade of the landing at the head of each stairway.

On the white-awning topmost terrace Twenty-five, the new ruling elite of Sandcliff luxuriously lazed. There was a narrow white awning over the door-

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way of each barrack apartment on Twenty-one, -two and -three, and over the doorway of each center apartment on each lower terrace. Toka's eyes now reflected an intense inner burning and aching as they took in the topmost terrace, the four below, and below those the twenty terraces of square-cut, darkly gaping apartment openings, one hundred to a terrace. His dark eyes burned at the patrols on those twenty terraces, many of them lazing under the small awnings of the centrally located "offices." His eyes burned at the warriors on Twenty-one, -two and -three, many of whom were also lazing under the ownings of the barracks apartments.

Then Toka's eyes were drawn as by a magnet to terrace Three, apartment Seventy-five. He felt a queer softening as his aching eyes rested there. Outwardly, Seventy-five on Three seemed like all "unofficial" apartments below the topmost five terraces. No awning shaded the doorway and section of terrace upon which it opened, an awning, as once, to be dropped over the opening against the sharp coolness of the nights, or to be dropped and made fast at a moment's notice against the violent storms which raged up so swiftly from the south; nothing to insure a measure of modest privacy; no door, as those on terrace Twenty-five, but which those on Twenty-five seldom closed except against a storm. As from a few other apartments, though, a faint wisp of blue-gray wood smoke lazed out and up from the doorway.

Yes, reflected Toka, Roya would be cooking the seemingly eternal broth.

CHAPTER IV

TOKA was suddenly aware of Rok speaking low and excited, "Don't let on anything, Toka, but just start clawing here beside me again."

Covering his wonderment with elaborate weariness, Toka turned his back on Sandcliff and crawled slowly and aimlessly to Rok's side and began feigning hopeless clawing.

Rok whispered, "I got two more, Toka! But what whoppers! Look!"

Toka shifted his eyes and head slightly toward Rok. Two black water berries were almost filling the palm of a familiar hand. The berries glistened lusciously large and oblong. Toka softly whistled in admiration.

"Enough strength in one of these," Rok said, as he expertly snipped the stems with his finger nails, "to make a guy clean out the whole dirty gang, alone."

But a strong uneasiness suddenly touched Toka. He glanced intently around at the edging jungle. Nothing. Then that rising and falling surf of sounds suddenly changed, became a restless low steady murmur. Toka was up in an instant, ax in hand, intent. Rok and the rest of the party were instantly alert. All swiftly took in the edging jungle, strained their acute hearing. Nothing, yet.

The Hop was rising, had almost covered the narrow section of berry ooze. The sector had been clawed, if not clean of berries, then of more than had been thought possible a short half hour ago. Toka instantly gave a low fluttering call. The party quickly headed back up across the ooze shore toward the sprawling thicket. Toka and Rok brought up the rear, some fifty paces back. Toka saw that each of the party, though hurrying, presented a satisfying picture of utter weariness and disappointment. But Toka's uneasiness became even stronger. He gave the sharp fluttering call once and heard it repeated reassuringly from around the Hop. Nothing, yet.

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Rok sneaked one of the huge berries into Toka's hand. As he dragged along beside Rok, Toka took a covert look at the remarkable fruit. He couldn't help thinking how nourishing, how immensely strengthening the great berry would be to an underfed body.

He was suddenly jerked from his reverie by high and penetrating calls, frantic on the still air!

INSTANTLY the heavy air was filled and overflowing with steadily growing thunder! The ooze began quaking violently in time with the thundering! The frantic warning call cut through again and again! Hoarse shouts came from the rest of the party, now running, but too far from the thicket to reach it in time!

For almost in the same instant Toka's darting gaze was caught by the flashing picture of a black-and-green mottled nightmare exploding from a dense squatting of fern trees, eight hundred paces down shore. It was a dreaded Big Snake. One fully as high and wide as four men and fifty paces long. Great muscles could be seen rippling in a sinewy flow of power under the gleaming slickness. The monster was streaking up along in front of the edging jungle. It was cutting straight toward the main body of the party, would easily intercept them.

The dinosaur was an awesome picture of unswervable power, strength and determination. Great round feet on short blocky legs were sucking out and then splattering thunderingly, earthquakingly into the ooze, driving with unbelievable speed. The great tapering tail undulated sinuously. In the great oblong head terminating the thick and rhythmically rippling neck, huge bulging red eyes were afire with the joy of pursuit, the thrill of an imminent capture of not one but many of the needed prey. As if savoring the catch, the great mouth split into a huge grin of ugly delight, then swung yellowly toothy and redly cavernous.

In one coordinated explosion of motion Toka had mouthed the big berry, had chewed and swallowed it, had wigwagged to the lookouts in the palms, "All get away. Carry on." And was now racing down shore, angling to intercept the Big Snake. With his present state of enforced lankness, and with such an inoffensive battle-ax, he knew he seemed racing straight into death.

Toka suddenly became aware of someone racing beside him. It was Rok.

"I'll draw it off!" snapped Toka, not pausing a stride. "You and the others run for Sandcliff!"

"Make it the other way, Toka!" yelled Rok. "You're the one everybody needs!"

"I'm giving the orders!"

"Not this time! I'm staying! You're going!"

Toka knew how stubbornly loyal Rok was. He could not stop now to argue with the fool.

Without pausing, Toka scooped up a handful of ooze, balled it tight with free hand. He suddenly stopped, drew back his right arm and threw the ooze ball, then continued racing toward the Big Snake. He saw the ooze ball arc forward of the racing reptile, which was

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now only a scant two hundred paces away from the main body of the party. The split moment seemed years, then the ooze ball and the Big Snake intersected, the ball splattering into one great red eye. The Big Snake slackened speed, blinked transparent eyelids frantically.

MEANWHILE Rok had thrown an ooze ball. This one now splatted square on the big black snout. Toka saw his opening strategy had succeeded: the Big Snake's attention was now drawn to Rok and himself, just as another ooze ball, thrown by himself, splatted squarely on a green mottle between the great red eyes. The monster roared, regathered speed, slewed around toward its tormentors. It showered up a huge sheet of ooze in the turning. Toka and Rok had also turned and were racing back toward the Hop, drawing the pursuer on.

Over his shoulder Toka saw the first of his party crash into the thicket. All would soon be in it, would be safely away and fading for Sandcliff as directed—if the Big Snake should be distracted a while longer. It bore down thunderously after its prey. At the water line Toka and Rok whirled, readied themselves.

"Don't try to kill," directed Toka easily, "unless we have to."

"Right," agreed Rok, breathing easily. "Might make them all madder than boiled lizards—killing one of them. As if we could with these things!" this last in reference to the red-headed battle-axes they had.

Toka estimated the Big Snake was now halfway between them and the edging jungle. It bore down with increasing speed.

"Separate ten paces," directed Toka. He felt his own tiredness, so long retained as camouflage on behalf of The Plan, already vanishing under the ravenous workings of his stomach. Rok would be likewise affected.

But the Big Snake was suddenly so looming its breath was a searing blast on an already foul air. Without pausing in stride it raised its great head, opened its great mouth wide and bit—to the right, toward Toka. Even on the slippery ooze Toka nimbly dodged, flashed his ax easily for the snapping yellow teeth. Along his arm and into his cool fighter being came a blood-awakening tingle as the broad battle-head connected, though only glaringly. Then the monster had flashed out into the Hop with a great splashing of water all around it.

The Big Snake quickly whirled, roiling the Hop. It rushed back, mouth again wide. Splitting the Hop into huge sheets of spray, the monster thundered out and bit—toward Rok. But Rok, too, easily dodged, swung as easily. And as the monster swept past came the sound of an all-too-innocent splat, square on the ugly snout.

The Big Snake's momentum carried it halfway to the edging jungle. It whirled, fell, scrambled up and came rushing back at angry speed. Toka—Rok ten paces right—waited at the water line. Toka felt his own strength returning in great waves. Rok seemed to be having the same experience; his face reflected a zest for the battle. The huge water berries were being absorbed.

TOKA, alert, knowing Rok was with him in split moment unison, suddenly broke and began racing north along the water line. The Big Snake had to swerve suddenly. It sprawled, slithered about a moment, regained its footing and raced madly after its prey, cutting ahead of them. Toka, Rok performing like his shadow, promptly whirled and raced back south. The Big

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Snake had to whirl again. It fell sprawling onto the slippery ooze, scrambled up and raced in hot pursuit.

Toka could hear it gaining fast on the quaking ooze. He and Rok suddenly angled toward the jungle, then cut sharply back toward the water line. The Big Snake slewed past on the angle toward the edging jungle, again whirled amazingly for such a monstrosity, but again lost its footing, sprawled ridiculously, scrambled to its feet and came rushing back.

This time it did not head straight for its prey but cut between them and the jungle, then began loping back and forth between them and the jungle, herding them back toward the water line. Toka allowed Rok and himself to be slowly herded back, keeping the Big Snake centered on themselves.

The monster was moving slowly and easily now. Toka and Rok suddenly stopped. They were ankle-deep in the rising Hop. They automatically separated ten paces. The Big Snake faced them, slowly advanced to within striking distance, then stopped. Toka and Rok waited, tense.

With blinding speed the reptile raised its head and opened its mouth and bit —for Rok. Toka saw Rok dodge, swing and connect solidly, but not satisfyingly, on a long yellow eyetooth. But the Big Snake paused a split moment. It was all Toka needed to flash in and smash lightly at the other sensitive eyetooth. Then, he on one side and Rok on the other, they raced past the only slightly painfully shuddering hulk and on toward the edging jungle.

But glancing black, Toka saw the Big Snake quickly recover, whirl, this time keeping its footing, and come streaking after the tricky prey. The monster was angry and rumbling like rolling thunder. Toka heard and felt it gaining fast.

He and Rok were racing side by side. Toka put out an arm in signal and he and Rok suddenly separated wide. The Big Snake, unable to make an instant choice, tried to stop, but was carried past them by momentum. It quickly whirled, sprawled writhing, scrambled up, churning the ooze, and came rushing back for another try. But Toka—Rok laughing as he kept pace—was racing back to the water line, drawing the now ooze-grimy pursuer away from the jungle.

SEEING its intended victims suddenly stop, turn and wait at the water line, the Big Snake promptly slewed to an ooze-spraying halt looking for another trick. To Toka's satisfaction those long eyeteeth were obviously paining the monster. Its great red eyes were now firing viciously. Its breath was coming in deep blasts. Rumbling rolling thunder, the Big Snake slowly advanced, wary. The great muscles were knotting and writhing and reknotting in pain and growing anger under the muck-mottled scaliness. The great pained head began swaying slightly, almost hypnotically on the long thick neck.

"Getting madder than a boiled lizard," observed Rok.

"Remember," said Toka, "don't kill unless we have to." His eyes were narrowed and hard with concentration, with awareness. No group of any size, even when armed with the best of battle-axes, had ever for long bested one of the huge reptiles. Toka felt the Hop rising, steadily rising. It was closing the distance between clutching water and but little safer jungle.

Toka glanced quickly, anxiously toward Sandcliff. The party had not yet arrived there. Soon, more and tougher Big Snakes would be here. Why they weren't already here was a wonder. But

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he and Rok had to play bait a while longer.

CHAPTER V

"HERE we go again!" suddenly shouted Rok.

Toka readied, but barely in time. The Big Snake had drawn its great head up and back and was snapping with blinding speed—for him. The slimy scaly jowl burned Toka's shoulder as he spun away and swung his axe. Suddenly aware of what he was doing, he tried to stay his slash, couldn't, and the scaly jowl was laid open to the bone by the dull-edged battle-head.

As Toka feared, the unintentional wounding brought quick response. The Big Snake recoiled, roared and writhed in pain. Then, great red eyes spitting hot anger, it immediately bit like a bolt—for Rok. Rok spun away and made a sweeping one handed swipe. The other scaly jowl swelled in a huge welt. But at the bite for Rok, Toka was in motion and was now midway beside the lowly extended neck. He as hammering his flat battle-head on the muck-mottled scaliness under which rippled hard flesh. He was hammering for a certain paralyzing nerve center, was hammering the spot into a great swollen blister, but without effect. The neck convulsed mightily, knocked him sprawling.

Pain-mad head again raised, the Big Snake saw him scrambling, an easy catch. In a flash the head shot down., But Toka was aware of Rok racing in at the moment of his sprawling, and Rok was now a slashing and bloodletting distraction. Thus Toka was clear and on his feet, racing in again. The monster's head was a bloody mess from Rok's slashing. Toka knew the decision on battle had been forced and he lay there hardly breathing.

Rok was now dodging desperately, was slashing viciously and defensively at the snapping and bleeding head. Toka was back at mid-neck. He leaped astride and began driving by sheer strength his dull battle-head again and again into the muscular thickness. Blood began spurting from a dozen deep cuts and the Big Snake became a wildly roaring tornado of blood-mucky madness. The ooze, slippery in its own right, became even more so with the blood churned into it.

Toka saw that Rok was keeping his feet and dodging and slashing. Toka firmly rode the neck bulging between his legs. He furiously drove his ax again and again into the midneck section. He wondered why the handle did not break. The monster thrashed and snapped, roared and whirled, sprawled and scrambled up and began again. Toka was aware all of them were dripping with ooze and muck, sweat and blood. The Hop, in which part of the battling took place, began to color a dark muddy red. But the Big Snake seemed not to weaken one bit for all its beating and loss of blood. The battle raged as in an endless nightmare, from into the edging jungle and out into the Hop, up and down the shore, gutting and gouging the shore and jungle, roiling the Hop to a foaming red.

Toka, grimly astride the great neck, clearly knew he could not now escape. Rok could, but refused to leave. The Big Snake seemed not to weaken a fraction, seemed only to double and then redouble its efforts. It was now battle to death.

THE great neck, growing steadily more slippery with muck and blood, suddenly began bunching and knotting, then snapping viciously straight out and snapping back and rebunching and reknotting and snapping. Toka felt as

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if his insides were being flailed from him. His head snapped this way and that. His vision was blurred. He felt his grip weaken ever so slightly, felt himself suddenly shot high and come down sprawling face first into choking ooze and water. He scrambled up, saw Rok suddenly bowled over by a blow from the angrily snapping head.

The Big Snake rushed for the nearest victim, Rok. Toka, dripping and unnoticed, raced desperately in to distract. But long-denied jaws snapped, caught Rok, but only by the hair. Even as he was swished aloft Rok kept slashing at the already ribboned mouth, snout and head, but without avail. In victory the Big Snake seemed drugged to pain. It whirled triumphantly to streak away with its prey. The great tapering tail came sweeping toward Toka.

Toka quickly planted his feet firm, flashed his ax viciously. A long length of the mucky tail dropped spurting and writhing onto the ooze. Came a deafening roar of pain, and Rok was dropped free. Still roaring, the Big Snake whirled with rampant viciousness at Toka.

Toka rushed in with abandon. The Big Snake was forced to strike too soon. Toka dodged, stepped in, swung viciously, slashed a deep cut above one bulging red eye, was away. The blood was streaming blindingly over the eye. Rok was in, too, reckless, distracting. As the now-frantic big reptile struck toward Rok, Toka raced in to mid-neck, leaped astride. Rok spun, closed in, swung with venom. Blood poured from above the other bulging red eye. Rok swung swiftly a second time, hit a tooth and his battle-ax shattered, splintered from his hand. Scampering to clear, he slipped. Great yellow teeth again snapped on a head of long hair.

But Toka, at the same moment, astride the neck, with all his berry-given strength desperately drove his battle-head out of sight into the madly flailing neck. Came a sharp snapping and splintering sound of overstrained wood and stone, and on its heels a muffled bony snap. Rok, groggy, was dropped free. The Big Snake shuddered the length of its neck, began going slowly limp. The great mucky and bloody body began quivering, relaxing.

Toka leaped clear a split moment before the reptile collapsed and lay twitching. It gave one last convulsive twitch. The reflex action started the mountainous hulk rolling toward the water. Over and over it rolled and out into the Hop, floating on the muddy red waters.

Rok came panting up to Toka. They stood on the shore near the water line, gasping for breath, looking out to where the huge reptile's awesome hulk gently rode, half submerged. Then they looked at each other.

"Holy leaping lizards, Toka!" gaped Rok. "You . . . you killed it! You saved my life! You saved all of us!"

TOKA only turned and took in the edging jungle, took in Sandcliff. He grunted grimly, satisfied at what he saw at Sandcliff, then led the way quickly up across the ooze toward the jungle.

"Jeepers, Toka!" exclaimed Rok. "Nobody ever did anything like that before! Why, I'll bet all Sandcliff—" He turned and gazed up at Sandcliff.

Without pausing in stride, Toka gave Sandcliff another quick glance. On every terrace groups could be seen watching. The groups on the terraces below the five topmost were waving, could be heard cheering.

"Heh!" snorted Rok. "Wonder what old hairless and his bunch think about that? The dirty rats!" There was

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dark venom in the final remark.

"You did as much as I did, Rok," replied Toka. "Besides, it wasn't one of the plated kind—and we had your big berries."

"Yeah," agreed Rok, proud, "those berries sure gave us the big muscle when we needed it!" He was carefully casual as he felt his head of hair. "And I still got nearly all the others I found!"

Toka feignedly felt his own head of hair. He, too, had nearly all his find. Perhaps, he thought, an omen.

CHAPTER VI

TOKA, Rok beside him, was nearing the edging jungle now, but a considerable way down shore from the thicket out of which the party had started. Toka was hurrying the way toward another great thicket. A great palm towered from this thicket also. He and Rok could climb it, thought Toka, and—

A sudden strong uneasiness gripped Toka. But it was all over in one terrible moment. A tremendous Big Snake with great green scales, a colossus of the species, spike-backed and roaring mad, fiery-eyed and cavernously toothy, was leaping straight at them from the jungle, was towering, was blotting out the sky above them, was upon them in gleeful fury.

Might as well try cutting down Sandcliff with a brittle red-headed battle-ax, thought Toka, as to fight this armor-plated Big Snake bare-handed; its great lapped scales were harder than most rock.

With a shout to Rok to do likewise, Toka did the only thing practical: instantly threw himself under the monster's paler green scaly belly and into the thicket. He then swiftly made to rise and run, but tripped on a looped root and sprawled choking into the soft and stenchy underfooting. He flattened himself for the inevitable snapping of those monstrous jaws, the bite of those great teeth.

The whole world seemed swirling and beating upon and all about him. Then as quickly as it had come it was gone, on a thin high scream that faded into the constant throbbing undertone of the Big Brown.

All of Toka's remaining strength seemed swept away in that scream. His blood was chilled. He lay hugging the slimy soft earth another eternal moment, listening, hoping, scarcely able to breathe, shivering clammily in the heat. True, the berry was wearing off, and the fight had burned up tremendous amounts of energy. But that fading scream seemed to have taken everything. Toka's thoughts turned to the pivot of their lives for the past two dozen months, The Plan. Without Rok . . .

Toka snapped his jaws savagely on his momentary weakness. Rok—Rok would have carried on, was duty bound to, like all the others. Their plans had taken that into consideration along with everything else.

His racing heart finally quieting, Toka rose unsteadily to his knees and peered warily from the thicket. The shore was again everywhere barren of movement and, seemingly, of any life. Only that length of Big Snake tail was foreign. All the jungle was again innocently motionless. But how quickly it could explode! The Hop was calm, but muddy, bloody. The Big Snake's carcass still floated gently. The ooze was painfully roiled in front of Toka and for a considerable distance up and down the shore. Trackings of great circular footprints, easily three paces in diameter, were slowly filling with muddy water, bloody water.

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TOKA gathered his remaining strength, rose to his feet and stepped from the thicket. He felt strangely alone, suddenly realized how much Rok's presence had meant, now that he didn't have it. There was an unnatural moisture in his eyes as he walked quickly to that length of Big Snake tail, looped it up over one shoulder, returned quickly to the jungle, slipped into it and headed shadow-like for distant Sandcliff.

He paused only twice on his swift and silent way, the first to pick up a certain large and dewy, green and square-shaped leaf from a low cluster of them growing beside the cool little brook tumbling down from the spring of Sandcliff. The leaf was slightly sticky on its under side, slick and waxy on the other. Toka carefully removed all his large find of berries from his head and wrapped them securely in the great leaf, sticky side in, then sealed the pack by pressing the leaf's lapping edges. The result was a square pack that would preserve the berries indefinitely.

Toka then fingered his hair free of tangles, bathed in the stream and drank deep of its cool clear waters. The large pack of berries in one hand, Big Snake's tail over one shoulder, he then continued on his way. But he was careful to leave no mark of his travel now. He ached some of body, but ached much of mind about his coming meeting with Roya.

Some four hundred paces distant from Sandcliff, and still untrailed, Toka slipped into a lofty and seemingly unpenetrable tangle. A moment later, he came upon the vegetation-covered small rocky upthrusting that the tangle so completely concealed, concealed even from a few feet distance. Slipping the length of Big Snake tail from his shoulder, he stepped up to a large vine-entwined boulder of the rockiness and pulled a certain vine. The great boulder swung silently and easily back into the rocky hillock and revealed a tremendous cavern.

Toka stepped in, eyed the stacks upon stacks of large leaf-wrapped packs. He grunted in satisfaction at the recent additions, then added his own. He gazed reflectively a moment upon the rows after rows of confidently waiting battle-axes. The tough black handles and shatterless double heads, one head wide and keen as a split hair and the opposite head broad and wickedly knobbed, were like well-turned bits of restless and viciously glowing midnight. Toka's eyes passed over the piles of long and narrow knives, gleaming keenly, ready for impatient hands of righteous vengeance. He thought of the long hours, stealthy hours, back-breaking hours, hours sandwiched here and there with blood, intense hours in the dark of the moon, that had been poured into The Plan so far. It had to work.

Turning away from it and stepping in, Toka pulled another vine of the great boulder. The huge rock swung silently shut, was again an ageless part of this rocky knoll in an untracked tangle. Looping the length of Big Snake tailback onto his shoulder, Toka headed on to Sandcliff, on to the furtherance of The Plan.

CHAPTER VII

TOKA hoped he was a picture of a man trying, not too successfully, to cover up tiredness and disappointment. Under six pairs of narrowly watchful eyes, he reached the top of the east ladder, swung himself up onto the balustrade, stepped down into the first terrace. He unlooped the length of Big Snake tail from his shoulder, glanced

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about for an idle ax. Seeing none, as he knew he would not, he held his hand out to Scar Face. As Toka expected, Scar Face automatically handed over his black battle-ax. Toka's natural and friendly yet commanding manner seemed to take the rest of the greeting committee by surprise also. Toka held up the length of tail, flashed the keen-edged ax once and full half the tail lay at the blue-sandaled feet of the blue-shorted collectors and patrols. Toka inscrutably eyed them.

The two collectors were huge-muscled hulks, normally bullying in manner. One was marked for small red burning eyes. The other differed by having constantly shifting black eyes and a nose that many times more than once had been badly broken. The lips of both were loose, lecherously twitching. This pair was flanked by four equally unpleasant uglies, who were the patrols for terrace One and who also doubled as the collectors' underlings.

One of these underlings, the aforementioned Scar Face, a wicked scar jagging whitely from left ear to mouth corner, now came alive and scowlingly stepped up and grabbed his ax from Toka. The action broke the spell Toka had cast. As Toka patiently waited, the two collectors glared down at the tax a long moment, then looked up, fingering their knife hilts.

"All your berries!" demanded Red Eye.

"I have none," replied Toka.

"You didn't knock off that Snake on a drink of Hop water!" snarled Red Eye.

"Tell me, have you had a drink of Hop water lately?" politely inquired Toka.

"He tied the berries in his hair!" leered Broken Nose. "Just like the other saps!"

Toka felt himself successfully never so much as twitch a muscle in response. Broken Nose stepped up to him, ran rough hands through his hair and over his body in search. Empty-handed, muttering foully, Broken Nose stepped back beside Red Eye. Toka never smiled, outwardly.

"Hand over the rest of that tail!" snarled Red Eye.

Toka replied by calmly looping the remainder of tail back onto his shoulder.

"Hand it over!" roared Red Eye.

Red Eye, Broken Nose and their four underlings were twitching their knife hilts. Broken Nose was smiling in ugly anticipation.

Toka eyed them easily. "And when the Great Kola hears?" he quietly suggested.

THE bullying group immediately grew unsure of themselves, licked their lips, shifted their eyes and their feet, looked uneasily to Red Eye. Red Eye opened his mouth, but Toka, inwardly smiling, had turned and was halfway up the east stairway toward the second terrace. Out of the corner of an alert eye, Toka saw Broken Nose pick up the regular fifty percent tax, eye it a moment, then toss it to an underling with orders to send it up to Kola. Broken Nose then joined the equally disgusted Red Eye and the underlings and stalked back toward Fifty on One, their office, formerly an apartment.

Starved faces, craning from other apartments along the first terrace, had witnessed the whole incident, and now discreetly withdrew. The story would be many times secretly retold, relished.

The vertical distance between terraces was that of four men, via stairway longer. The distance was an effort for Toka, to anyone watching.

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As he stepped up onto terrace Two, Toka found himself the center of the silent group of near-naked youngsters who always awaited him after the hunt. The picture was the same. Large eyes protruded from dark hollows. Cheeks once full and rosy were shrunken and pale. Hands, touching reverently toward him, were shrunken claws. Bodies were scarcely more than living skeletons. The large eyes pleaded from his forcedly smiling face to the length of Big Snake tail.

"What you'd like to give the Great Kola?" whispered Toka.

The children grinned, and an old food knife of red stone suddenly appeared from among the children. Toka promptly swung the tail from his shoulder and with the knife quickly and easily cut the tail into a pile of huge chunks of clean pink meat, then returned the knife to the group. The weapon immediately disappeared. Toka placed a chunk of the meat into every pair of little claws.

As Toka had figured, one chunk was left over, for apartment Seventy-five, terrace Three.

Their faces alight, the precious food clutched tightly, their eyes speaking their gratitude, the children scattered for home.

No one saw Toka's jaw muscles slowly knot white, his eyes harden from gentle brown to deadly black. Toka turned, again took the east stairway to terrace three.

CHAPTER VIII

THE warriors and the patrols off duty lounged about on their simply appointed terraces, Twenty-one, -two and -three. But terrace Twenty-five was lavishly comfortable under the hot afternoon sun. Huge creamy-white awnings, firmly pegged into the elaborately carved back wall and tautly supported by polished black poles set at an extending angle from the low massive balustrade, shaded Twenty-five's broad length. The only breaks in the continuous awning were over the landing areas below each elevator recess, at the heads of the stairways from Twenty-four. The awnings were of wool-free goatskin and had deep black fringe on the outer drop edge. By virtue of Twenty-five's physical loftiness, gentle breezes frisked about in cooling complement to the shading. Lounges, deeply cushioned with woolly white goatskins were pulled up alongside the balustrade and commanded an unobstructed view of the world from east around south to west.

It was a world of brutally beautiful desolation, predominantly red, touched strikingly with black, but not without other contrasts. Directly across from Sandcliff and on the far other side of the valley, a mass of lustrous white stone thrust mighty pinnacles toward the sky. There was the valley itself, a wide and yellow-splotched green ribbon, stretching from out the smooth horizon of the east and on into the equally flat horizon of the west.

The tawny yellow splotches in the green were the larger of treacherous potholes and slime fields. A particularly huge field was some five thousand paces down valley, on this north side.

Flowing swiftly and throbbingly through the valley's center was the wide and muddily roiling Big Brown. Set down midway between Sandcliff and the river was the mirroring oval of the Hop. Here and there up through the jungle, rolling up to the base of Sandcliff, came the jeweled sparklings of the brook tumbling and angling down from the west base of Sandcliff to feed the Hop. Over all arced a deep blue sky. The air was crystal clear, affording

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perfect visibility to already superkeen eyes.

HAVING completed their dining, the present tenants of Twenty-five were now strolling leisurely back onto the terrace. These men, Kola's key men, and their feminine companions were in a gay mood. All were clad only in shameless briefs that had been tailored from an iridescent fabric woven from long combings of goat wool and dyed a cobalt-blue. The bodies of all the wearers of this revealing attire were a golden tan. Though differing in stature and obvious gender of form, all were strikingly standard in full symmetry of development, in fascinating tawniness of movement and vibrance of health.

The feet of all were classically shod in flexible sandals of blue-dyed goatskin. The sandals of the men differed from the women's mesh-toed ones by having wickedly knobbed black stone toecaps.

The men's unintelligent heads were shining sleek. The women's coldly beautiful features were complemented by sheening hair left wavedly tumbling after being caught close across the top of the head by gemmed tiaras. From the feminine ears and beautifully long fingers, additional jewelry flashed in brilliant complement.

"Kola"

The men's arrogant hard features, some battered and others wickedly scarred from battle and personal brawling, frequently broke as short coarse masculine laughter joined tinkling feminine laughter following ribaldly witty sallies. But the men's eyes seldom lost their habitual coldness and darting, their greedy and licentious light.

The westernmost end of Twenty-five, the area fronting apartment One, widened to project half out over the end of Twenty-four, and by so doing commanded a clear view east along Twenty-five, Twenty-four and immediately lower terraces. Upon this fully awninged and rectangularly projecting section of Twenty-five, and further aloofened by some twenty paces of distance from the nearest group, lounged a party of three.

The dominant member—an instantly dominant member in any company—was a man of tremendous physique. His height was matched and made to appear natural by a superbly muscled body. He made every movement, bore himself, even in lounging, with a consciously commanding air. His thick, cruel mouth below a forcefully arched nose wore a habitually faint sneer. The close-set eyes were an opaque blue. They gazed with possessive greed, with ruthlessness and lust for gory thrills. His huge domed skull was barren of hair, was a deep tan from the sun. This was Kola, from whom all Sandcliff now flowed or stopped, lived or died, owed its very existence.

ON A nearby lounge relaxed an individual of physically small stature. His slightness of build covered a well-known whiplash toughness and resiliency. Thin lips smiling perpetually sardonic, narrow rat-like features, a suave and cunning air, cold drilling green eyes, bespoke this man's value

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to Kola. He was Kagi, obviously conscious of his importance in the new scheme of things, obviously making it a point not to let others forget this importance. Kagi's gaze passed frequently over the third member of the royal party, to the other side of Kola.

She lounged in languid coolness, seemingly unaware of the lascivious green eyes playing over her. But her dark eyes were sultry with a full awareness of her arousing appeal. As her brother surpassed in the physical bruteness of the male form, so Rissa exceeded in a dark sculptured perfection of the feminine form.

Idly, possessively, Rissa's gaze drank in the picture of luxury, of plenty and power, the aloofness of this westernmost end of Twenty-five, the muscular warriors lounging down on Twenty-one, -two and -three. She drank in the ornate parquetry of the floor of Twenty-five's terrace, the delicately beautiful inlay scenes in the back wall, the massive balustrade, the black-fringed creamy-white awnings, the lounges deeply piled with the softest goatskins in all Sandcliff, the arrogant glittering company on the rest of Twenty-five.

Her wandering eye took in the servants, no more than near-naked starved slaves, standing like statues beside the doorways of the apartments in which they served. These shadows of humanity dared not venture further into this company on the terrace unless summoned; they waited motionless, ready to obey instantly the slightest bidding. They obeyed completely, slaved till no longer able, then were callously discarded.

Yes, Twenty-five was different now than terrace One, on which Kola and Rissa had grown up; it was different now, luxuriously so, arrogantly so, than all the terraces of Sandcliff. Kola had soon seen to that. Rissa's idle glance passed over the sprawling figure of her ruthless brother.

He was still gazing silently out over the broad green valley far below, possessively out over the barren red hills browing its far other side down to the west of the great white pinnacled cliff, expectantly over the hills and down onto the arid and endless red flatlands, the immense table-smooth playing field of the Big Snakes.

THE field was marked out for a kind of baseball. The first base and right field foul line ran due west, paralleling the brow of the valley. The third base and left field foul line ran due south, paralleling the line of low red hills that marched straight south into invisibility after swinging sharply from the west and in back of the great white cliff. The third base and left field foul line was in direct line with the westernmost end of Sandcliff.

The slopes along first and third and around back of home base were thick with Big Snakes. There were huge spike-backed ones, horny armor-plated ones, slick smooth-skinned ones, ones of every shading and coloring and ones that were mottled combinations of every tint and hue. There were ones with tremendous heads on tremendous bodies, ones with tremendous heads on ridiculously small bodies, ones with ridiculously small heads on huge bodies. There were large ones, small ones, medium ones; of every nightmarish structure. All were enthusedly jabbering and waving their forelimbs and thumping their great tails.

The sounds mingled into a throbbing surf of sound that rose and fell over the land and carried pulse-quickeningly up to the top five terraces of Sandcliff, but carried a pall of gloom to the lower terraces.

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On the diamond itself the task of rechalking the base and foul lines, the coaching and batters' boxes, had just been completed. This rechalking had been done by a Big Snake possessed of an unusually long and calloused tail. He had first swished his tail around in the big chalk pit at the back base of the white cliff, then had returned to the diamond and trotted about, letting his tail drag appropriately.

The distances between bases must have been at least four hundred human paces, that from pitcher's plate and mound to home plate at least five hundred. The pitcher's plate and home plate were of great smooth slabs of white stone found near the cliff, off which they had scaled in erosion. The Big Snakes had laid the slabs flush with the field surface.

The cushions for the three other bases were of huge resilient squares of black swamp sod. They had been gouged out of one of the many nearby swamps in the valley, trimmed into shape by sharp teeth, and then thrust onto stakes of broken palm limbs that had been driven into the playing field at the desired spots for first, second and third bases. The sods made good base cushions.

No one could say the Big Snakes were not possessed of an amazing and impressionable form of reasoning and intelligence.

The field, fast from a long dry spell, had been carefully gone over by the groundkeepers and was ready for the big moment coming up. The roars and tail thumpings of spectatoring Big Snakes suddenly rose in a great wave of sound, rolled out over the land, beat against Sandcliff, excited into tense silence the watchers on terraces Twenty-one to Twenty-five. The Yellow Legs, their legs muddied a bright yellow, were running out onto the field. The opposing team, the Blue Backs, their backs muddied a brilliant blue, also took up position. The present game, recessed till a new ball had been found and the grounds touched up, was about to be resumed.

CHAPTER IX

AS HE stepped onto terrace Three, Toka saw it was deserted except for the ever-present quartet of armed patrols, not in their office in the center of the terrace, but at the far west end, lounging lazily there in the sun. As he strode past empty and gaping apartment openings and toward Seventy-five on Three, Toka knew the patrols were watching him. Every going and coming was under surveillance now. Sandcliff had become a vassal to a hairless human snake and his gang, and all others of the tribe were suspect.

The wisp of blue-gray smoke was still lazing out and up from Seventy-five. A mouth-watering aroma drifted to Toka's nostrils. He allowed his bare feet to announce his coming, with a whispering pad, pad on the hot terrace surface. Again he strained to think of something to say, some comforting word. Again he ached with failure.

He stepped to the doorway of Seventy-five, stopped, waited. Two paces within, on the plain red floor of the foyer, near the west wall, Roya was kneeling over a tiny fire. On the floor, next the wall, and in handy arrangement, was grouped a scant assortment of cookery utensils and supplies. Roya's perfect back, bare, a golden tan like the rest of her body, was toward Toka. Hair matching the golden light of the sun tumbled in softly haloing waves to her beautifully smooth shoulders. Her neat feet were unshod, the soles calloused. She was slowly stirring the simmering contents of a medium sized

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red clay kettle that was supported over the fire by two bricks. Toka knew Roya was aware of his presence; the sun angled into the foyer and laid a triangle of golden light on the bare stone floor; his body cast its shadow there beside Roya. But perhaps she, too, was trying to control her sorrow. Toka waited.

Roya ceased her stirring, placed the large bone ladle across the top of the kettle. She then rose easily to long and beautiful legs and stepped to the doorway, leaned against it beside Toka. She avoided his eyes, gazed silently down at her feet, idly worked her toes.

Under long lashes her wide-set eyes were as deep a blue as the sky. Her fine-featured face, like her inadequately clad body, had wasted in some places to a hollowed thinness. Yet even in want and hunger her clean beauty seemed to have been only the more heightened. Toka had the sudden savage wish that the Big Snakes' latest victim might have been he instead of this girl's brother.

Roya's full lips suddenly twitched, her eyes filled, spilled a tear to the floor. Her body abruptly sagged. A sudden panic inside himself, Toka quickly put down the chunk of meat, awkwardly took the quietly crying girl in his arms. Strangely, he suddenly did not feel awkward. Roya seemed to fit his arms, his embrace. Trying to comfort her, he stroked her head, buried against his chest. The hair was wonderfully soft and thrilling to his touch.

"I'm sorry, Roya," he hoarsely whispered.

AT THIS, Roya ceased her racking sobbing, pressed gently for release. Toka instantly let her go, anxiously eyed her. She dried her eyes on the backs of her hands, then looked steadily up into his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Toka," she whispered, trying to keep the tremble out of her mellow voice. "We can't let go just because another one of us has . . . gone."

"I wish it had been me!" whispered Toka. He couldn't keep the agony of it all out of his voice.

Roya put a silencing hand on his arm. "You couldn't help it, Toka," she tried to comfort. "No one could. I saw it all. Every one of us knows you couldn't have saved Rok."

Roya trying to comfort him! Toka reviled himself for the sudden wild desire to take advantage of the moment, to take her back into his arms, hold her close, shield her. What strange things were happening to him, changing his viewpoint? He suddenly remembered the chunk of meat. He quickly picked it up, handed it to Roya.

"Not much," he apologized. His heart twisted as Roya managed a smile.

"It may mean life," she whispered, "for Old Walloo."

Toka casually looked out and up and down the terrace. The patrols still lazed at the far west end. He stepped back.

"How is Old Walloo?" he whispered. He didn't attempt to conceal his concern, his anxiety.

Roya's deep blue eyes clouded, then cleared with hope. "This meat will help."

"Maybe I could sneak up a few—"

Roya had her hand over his mouth. "Other ears!" she warned in a whisper.

The rising and falling surf of sound rolling across the valley suddenly heightened in tempo. For the first time since returning to Sandcliff today, Toka let his eyes shoot out over that red brow of the other side of the valley. He was aware of Roya's eyes quickly following onto that playing field. He watched her anxiously. She paled, turned away, swayed slightly. Toka instantly had a steadying arm around her slender waist.

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A moment, and she pulled gently away, stepped back to the fire.

"Won't you come in, Toka?" Her voice was fiercely steady, but there was a plea in the invitation.

CHAPTER X

IT WAS the last half of the ninth inning. The score was thirty to twenty-seven, favor the Legs. Two Blue Backs were out. But the powerful Backs were still threatening with the bases loaded with their fastest runners. And coming up to bat in this spot of spots was the Backs' great slugger, The King. The King swaggered up toward the plate. He was a picture of supreme confidence, of tremendous strength and power. His slick black skin, even the blue mud smeared on his great back, glistened in the sunlight. He stood watching the Yellow Legs' battery taking a few warm-up pitches with the new ball.

To any of the supersharp eyes on Sandcliff, that new ball was more than faintly familiar. But the emotions of remorse decidedly were not present on upper Sandcliff.

The home plate umpire was similar to his three colleagues out around the bases, a colossus of armor-plated authority. He now waved, "Play ball!"

The Legs' catcher returned Rok to the pitcher, a long-beaked and huge-headed young colossal, The Strike-Out Prince. The King, left-tailed, stepped into the left batter's box. He took up his stance, tail to plate. His great head quarter swung around on his neck. He eyed The Prince, and smirked in derision. The Prince sneered back. The King grinned wickedly, waved his powerful black tail ominously. The Prince and the Legs were, on the surface, unimpressed. The Backs' base runners began hooting and jabbering, trying to rattle The Prince. They took short dancing leads off base.

The silent tenseness on terrace Twenty-five suddenly burst into hoarse exhortations, u n h e a r d by the Big Snakes. "Hit it, King!" "Put another one away for us!" "Slam it!"

Kola and party, though, contained themselves. For Kola, the thrill was wearing thin. Oh, yes, the games had been livened up by the Big Snakes suddenly using the new type article of play. Kola smiled thinly, almost retrospectively. But the thrill was wearing thin. Kola laughed softly, without mirth.

"Five thousand more berries The King makes it a round trip," he challenged to Kagi.

Kagi smiled deferentially. "Thirty thousand it is, Chief!"

The two laughed coarsely, knowingly.

Kagi's gaze passed again over the cool Rissa. "Make it forty grand, Kola, old-pal!" challenged Kagi, the impressing sport.

Kola's lips curled at the obvious play to Rissa. Without shifting his eyes, he softly, insinuatingly added, "Seventy-five."

Kagi's mien froze, grayed. He swallowed and, trying for carelessness, knuckled. "Seventy-five it is—Chief." His short laugh failed. Rissa's mouth smiled at the sky. Kagi flushed, then grayed again. He concentrated on the game.

THE consuming roar from the playing field abruptly ceased. The Prince was leaning over for his sign from his catcher. He got it, straightened up. The King swung his mighty tail back. He tensed, waited narrow-eyed. The Prince went into his windup, rared back, came down and whipped Rok in with blinding speed. Rok cracked into the catcher's claws. The King smiled broadly, relaxed. The

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It was a tense moment; the Prince wound up for the pitch—

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ump's left arm shot up. Ball! A mighty roar burst, swelled, subsided. The spectatoring Big Snakes again tensed, no more so than the human spectators on upper Sandcliff.

The Prince again wound up, whipped Rok in. The King merely watched. The ump's right arm shot up. Strike! Boos from upper Sandcliff mingled with those coming up from the field. The King turned and eyed the ump a moment, then turned back, waved his tail appraisingly, tensed, waited. The Prince merely smiled. And again Rok came whipping in. The King stood. The ump's left arm shot up. Ball two!

The King stepped out of the box, rubbed his tail in the dirt, shook it, then stepped back in, took two practice waves, tensed, waited. The Prince wound up, whipped. The King smiled tauntingly. The ump's left arm shot up again. Ball three! The King was grinning wide. The roar swelled to crescendant proportions. The catcher walked halfway out to the mound. The second baseman came in. They gathered round The Prince. They called in the head ump from back the home plate and handed him Rok. The ump looked Rok over, shook his great horned head "no," turned and ambled to back of the plate. He waved, "Play ball!"

In the throbbing silence The King once again took his stance, waited. The Prince, now blank of expression, got his sign from his catcher, slowly wound, whipped. The King watched Rok go past. The ump's right arm shot up. Strike two! The entire Blue Back team turned howling on the head ump. He glowered right back, thumped his great horned tail with authority, waved, "Play ball!" The spectators on upper Sandcliff as well as the spectatoring Big Snakes stood up for the next pitch.

The King stepped into the batter's box, readied. His face was grim, ominous. The Prince, sneering now, wound up, rared back, came down and whipped. The King was swinging from the heels, the expectant roaring starting among the spectators. "Splat!" heard clear to Sandcliff, and a kicking speck was soaring south toward invisibility, but awfully close to the left field foul line. But the Blue Backs on base were scampering home. The King was rounding second, leaving a trail of red dust. The spectatoring Big Snakes were cheering madly and thumping their great tails thunderously. The King crossed home plate with the winning run, was besieged by his cohorts and admirers.

On the royal end of terrace Twenty-five, Kola was laughing raucously down at Kagi. Kagi was trying to smile back.

"Another one of them put away!" roared Kola. A wishful expression came over his face. "Too bad it wasn't his dear little pal!"

"Can't have everything at once, Chief," managed Kagi.

"Meaning?"

THE SURF of happily riotous sound from the field had suddenly turned into an angry vituperative roaring. Kola and Kagi turned to look. The playing field was a melee of irate Big Snakes ganged around the big umpires. Kola's good humor switched to twitching red rage as he made out the cause of the violent argument and protestations on the field.

"Why, that crazy ump must be blind!" he raged.

Kagi became suddenly bland, no longer gray of complexion.

Kola raged on. "Why, that dirty no good Rok was slammed fair by a mile! I could see it from here even!" He raged off into cursing, swinging his great arms like a madman.

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Rissa had quietly slipped inside their apartment at the first sign of another of her brother's rages. Kola and Kagi stood watching the scene on the playing field.

The angry roaring rolled and echoed over the valley like constant thunder. It beat against Sandcliff and rolled back. The umps remained firm in their decision, kept shaking their great horned heads and pointing adamantly toward Sandcliff.

Kagi made the bland observation, "Guess our bet is off, Chief."

Kola whirled, his lips curling, his eyes spitting warning blue-white fire. "Off?"

"Game's been called again," easily observed Kagi, seeming oblivious of an impending explosion.

Snarling pent-up rage, Kola flashed one huge fist. Kagi bounced from the wall, lay quietly conscious on the terrace surface. Kagi's eyes drilled up into Kola's. The other parties on Twenty-five merely glanced once toward the royal end, then blithely ignored the proceedings as if they were not unusual. Kola stood spraddle-legged over Kagi.

"Get up!" he roared. "Get up, you rat, or you'll be their next ball!"

Kagi stirred to get his feet back under himself, but Kola's impatient hand grabbed him by the throat, yanked him up.

Kola thrust his rage-twisted face into Kagi's grayed one. "The bet is on, see! All on! And it's staying on!" He disdainfully tossed Kagi onto one of the lounges, then turned and stood beside the balustrade. He glowered out over the valley. His huge hands were still working.

Kola was unaware of Kagi's casual rising and strolling in past the new slave, a starved shadow of an old man, dutifully statuesque beside the entrance to the royal apartment.

CHAPTER XI

JAWS clamped from the spectacle beginning out on that field, Toka followed Roya to the fire. He wondered how she could do it: her hands scarcely trembled as she picked up the dull cookery knife, hacked small pieces of the meat into the simmering broth in the kettle, then laid the knife down, picked up one of a scant pile of huge green leaves and carefully wrapped the remaining meat in it. She then stepped into the apartment. Toka followed, anxiously alert for any sign of weakening.

The main room was large, bare, clean, dim. The floor, walls and ceiling were the plain deep red of the cliff, and were grooved into a block pattern simulating large masonry. At the back of this main room a doorway opened into greater dimness. But Roya stepped to the west wall of the main room, set the wrapped meat on the floor.

She pointed to a square on the west half of the south wall, near the foyer entrance to the room. Toka followed Roya's directing, pressed the designated square as Roya stretched up in the northwest corner of the room and pressed on a square. A third square, of the west wall, near the floor and to Roya's left, silently swung out, revealing a vault.

Toka caught a glimpse of well-known treasures: a double-headed battle-ax, intricately engraved and glowing black; a scabbarded black-handled long and narrow knife. His hands itched.

But Roya had picked up the meat, was placing it quickly in, swung the vault block shut. The wall was again a pattern of nothing more than simulated blocks of red masonry.

Roya returned to the foyer. Toka followed, leaned against the west wall, watched Roya. He could not shut his

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ears, his mind to that sound from the field. But Roya seemed completely unaware of it now. Kneeling beside the fire, she obliviously stirred the kettle's contents. In one unobtrusive glance Toka made out that, in addition to the bits of meat, a hollow old goat horn was simmering in the water. The aroma was good as it rose to his nostrils, but perhaps the broth could be stronger.

Roya ceased stirring, picked up a large red clay bowl from several sizes, held it to the kettle, tilted the kettle and filled the bowl brimming with all the broth and meat. She then rose easily, holding the bowl with both hands, and nodded for Toka to follow.

He followed the graceful Roya through the main room and through the doorway in the back wall and entered a small room. Its only light reflected through the main room. Toka's eyes quickly adjusted to the dimness. The room was clean, the red walls and ceiling and floor were bare, smooth except for the grooves for simulating masonry.

Toka followed Roya over to where an old man lay sleeping on a bed of one tattered goatskin, spread on the floor in one corner. Save for a bit of ragged goatskin about the loins, the old body was uncovered, unclothed. It was pitifully emaciated from long hunger. Long white hair flowed back from a high wide forehead. Even in wastedness the features were keen, fine, indicating a possessor of scholarly dignity.

ROYA knelt beside Old Walloo. "Wake up, my old dear," she softly called.

The old grandfather stirred.

"Time for your broth," tenderly announced Roya.

The old eyelids fluttered open, a faint fond smile curved the mouth, and deep blue eyes looked up into Roya's. The sound from the field seemed suddenly to penetrate the wise old head. The little smile faded, the eyes clouded.

The old voice trembled, "They're playing again."

"Toka's here," diverted Roya.

Old Walloo's eyes brightened as he beheld Toka. "Toka, my boy! Sit down, sit down!"

Toka smiled, helped Old Walloo to a cross-legged sitting position in the corner, then squatted to one side in front the old man. Roya placed the bowl of broth into the trembling old hands.

"Did you have some too?" anxiously asked Old Walloo.

"Of course!" laughed Roya. "Think I'm going to starve while you become fat as a prize goat?"

Toga swallowed hard, looked at the floor.

"And Rok?" inquired Old Walloo.

Toka detected Roya tremble, but she never faltered.

"Don't you worry about that one!" she said. She then helped the old hands raise the bowl to the mouth.

Old Walloo supped deeply, hungrily.

"Good?" smiled Roya.

Old Walloo smiled. "Almost good as a water berry, my child!"

Toka knew a little of what Roya must be going through; his own being was out there on that field. Toka felt Old Walloo's eyes on him. Old Walloo was grave now. Toka knew the old man, too, was feeling for that, to him as yet unknown, victim.

"The berries?" whispered Old Walloo.

"More than enough," replied Toka.

Roya again steadying, Old Walloo supped deep, then smiled thinly. "Soon," he pronounced, as if having a vision, "happiness will once again be over Sandcliff."

"Soon," said Toka.

Old Walloo suddenly cocked his head at Roya. "Rok. Where is the big rascal?

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Why is he not here?"

"Now don't worry about that one!" chided Roya. "Just drink your broth!"

Old Walloo obediently downed the last drop, handed the bowl to Roya. Toka felt those keen blue eyes turn again upon him. He could feel them searching his mind.

"They are playing again," said Old Walloo.

Toka only sat bowed. It seemed he could hear Roya's heart throbbing with his own.

"The hunt," continued Old Walloo. "What price?"

The hell of what was taking place on that field racking him, Toka remained bowed. "One," he said. He could feel the old eyes reading him, could feel Roya's eyes going inside him.

"Who?" quietly asked Old Walloo, his voice steady.

TOKA'S throat was in a vise of silence. He couldn't even meet those old eyes. Then he heard Old Walloo's breath suddenly catch. He looked up, saw the old man's head bow, a tear drop. Then the wasted old body was sagging. With Roya's help, Toka quickly assisted Old Walloo down onto his poor bed. Roya was a pillar. She put her head comfortingly on the old brow. Old Walloo looked up at them both.

"Tell me," he said, simply. "Tell me."

Following Roya's lead, Toka resumed cross-legged repose. He dropped his gaze to the floor, clenched his fists in his lap as Roya began, haltingly, relating the happenings. Apparently she had watched it all from the moment the party had stepped from the thicket. She lost herself in the telling of the fight. The sound from the field seemed now only a heightening accompaniment. Roya made the victory over the first Big Snake the heroic deed of all time. In it Toka and Rok assumed towering gallantry. It made Old Walloo's face glow with pride, and at the brief factual relation of Rok's capture, the old man was not bitter; he was intensely and quietly proud.

"We all have to pay some way," he softly philosophized. "I with my last grandson, my last kin outside of Roya." The once more rising and falling sound from the field seemed now a tribute, the way Old Walloo accepted his loss of Rok. The old grandfather shook his head. "Bad, though—killing that big slick-skin. You had to, though. But there'll be trouble."

Old Walloo reached for Toka's hands. The blue eyes flashed as they looked into Toka's. The old voice was suddenly strong, prophetic. Toka gravely listened to the one of wisdom reknowned.

"You will cleanse Sandcliff," pronounced Old Walloo. "You will not fail. Never fear. Conquer doubt. With the weapons of your father, our Great Tokay, you will lead the avenging of his passing."

Toka gave a questioning, an urging look. He knew Old Walloo wanted to tell it again.

"That hairless snake up there plotted our Great Tokay's passing," pronounced Old Walloo. "I'm sure of it. In some way it's all connected with that side terrace that hairless one insisted on building for our Great Tokay. Our Great Tokay appreciated beauty, fine work. He was grateful for the hairless one's gift. And so the hairless one began. He directed the preliminary work, but he, alone, without a single helper, finished the terrace. He refused to allow anyone watch him work. He claimed artistic principles. Our Great Tokay believed others as honest as himself. He indulged the hairless snake a free hand."

Toka bowed in recollection.

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OLD Walloo continued calmly, even though the sound from the playing field now crescendoed.

"It was just upon the completion of the side terrace that our Tokay disappeared, and reappeared out there on that field, a ball for those Big Snakes. Our Great Tokay was batted south to invisibility. Searching parties were out. They, too, were captured by the Big Snakes. The Big Snakes no longer used spongy balls of swamp sod; they refused to use anything but humans. And thus it began.

"There was an election to select a new leader. The secret ballots counted, that hairless one was the overwhelming choice. Yet, as you know, our later private count of noses showed that hairless one as legitimately elected—until he began making the changes, by whim, by lottery. By that time the patrols were his. Those we thought friends became warriors, became our enemies.

"You know the rest. The lootings and taxes, the starvings and beatings, the disappearances and the increasing mania of the Big Snakes. The mad pleasure that hairless snake and his foul company take in watching those games, in betting priceless berries on each outcome."

The sound from the field hushed, then suddenly differed. But Toka and Roya sat silent, waiting for Old Walloo.

"A storm is coming," pronounced Old Walloo.

Toka's heart raced his blood.

"My old bones say it will be a mighty storm." Old Walloo paused a significant moment. "All is ready?" he asked.

"All is ready," replied Toka.

Toka felt a surge of exultation.

Old Walloo smiled, closed his eyes. "Into the strong young hands of our Great Tokay," he murmured, pressing softly on Toka's hands. "The future of Sandcliff is well." Then Old Walloo let go Toka's hands, breathed deep, slept, impervious to the sudden thundering filling all the air, unaware, seemingly, of the sudden terrible rocking and quaking of Sandcliff.

CHAPTER XII

THE usual foyer with neat-rowed cooking utensils, covered fire hole and large stock of dry twigs on the left, and then the great main room of Kola's apartment, were familiar to Kagi. As he smoothed his hair back into place his eyes glittered greedily at the gleaming black stone parquetry of the main floor, the exotic scenes inlaid on the luminescently glowing white walls and ceiling. He envied also the soft lounges, the goat-leather-upholstered and willow-framed chairs, the long and low massive black stone table in the center of the room. The usual goat-tallow white candles, set in red clay holders, stood out in striking contrast on the black table. On the table was also a cylindrical black stone fire holder. It had a close-fitting cap that could be unsnapped so that the ever-smouldering fire within could flicker into flame and be used to light the way in the dark, ignite a candle or kindle a fire.

A doorway with two thin black stone doors swung in wide was west, to Kagi's left. On the east, to his right, on the opposite side of the room, another pair of similar doors were wide, revealing the glowing white walls of a tremendous corridor.

Kagi sauntered silently to the open west doorway. A casual backward glance, and he peeked, quickly drew back and turned with a small smile. He sauntered silently across to the doorway on the other side of the great room. Another casual glance backward, and he stepped through, hurried down a black-floored corridor that was walled

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and ceilinged with luminescently glowing white stone.

A few moments, and Kagi was back, the small smile still on his face. He strolled again to the west doorway, paused, lounged in it, taking in the picture of Kola's private side terrace, facing to the west.

This, the only doorway, opened onto the south end, and the terrace then ran some sixty paces north. It was four paces wide, was set back into the west drop of Sandcliff. It made Twenty-five itself appear common by comparison. The same type of low and massive balustrade enclosed it between each flanking side wall. Creamy-white awnings shaded it. Soft lounges invited. There the similarity ended. The floor was of huge square red and black blocks, finely laid into a checker pattern. The back and side walls were a striking collection of pastural scenes worked in varicolored inlays.

At arm's reach, up along the back wall, a gallery of well-carved black stone gargoyles projected. Some were laughing, others glum, others crying, all grotesque caricatures.

Potted palms and shrubs added a cool resting green touch to the retreat. Exotic flowers in varying degrees of bloom perfumed the air, added seductively to the intimacy.

Halfway up the nook, the back of her lounge toward the doorway, only the top of her black coiffure visible, Rissa lazed beside the balustrade. Kagi strolled soundlessly up to her, stood smiling down. She was looking idly off into the west, but seemed unaware of the endless expanse of brutally beautiful red-and-black desolation.

RISSA suddenly started, looked up. Her eyes and features cooled. Kagi sat easily, familiarly on a corner of the foot of her lounge. He half turned, facing her.

"There is more beauty to be enjoyed *on* this terrace than *from* it," he smiled.

"Where's Kola?" pointedly asked Rissa.

"Still watching his naughty old Snakes." Kagi laughed shortly, softly.

"And why aren't you watching them?" mocked Rissa.

"When there are so many other pleasures," replied Kagi, "I don't particularly care for Snakes."

"I don't care for them," smiled Rissa, "in any form, any time."

Kagi's eyes narrowed perceptibly, but his manner remained suave, suggestive. "You should have more pleasure, my dear." He edged closer up the side of the lounge.

Rissa's eyes became black daggers, matching her quiet voice. "I think the Great Kola wants you—now."

"Not yet," smirked Kagi.

His face twisting, Kagi abruptly lunged for Rissa, caught her. He mouthed lustily for her. She struggled desperately, silently, finally twisted from his fiercely foul embrace, gained her feet, beat him off, stepped back against the balustrade. Kagi gave a low animal laugh. His eyes burned now. Rissa was disheveled, gorgeously on fire with anger. Her deep breasts rose and fell. Her eyes blazed. But she remained silent, waiting, ready. Kagi sprang again. Rissa swiftly stepped aside, struck savagely with her open hand. The blow was a sharp report. Its mark was white, then quickly deep red on Kagi's fiendish face. He had recoiled from the blow, was an animal crouching.

"Get out!" spat Rissa. "Or I *will* call Kola!"

Kagi's manner became perceptibly unsure. He relaxed, straightened up, smoothed his hair.

"You'll change, my pretty one," he

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sneered. "Soon." He turned and sauntered mockingly back into the main room.

Her full lips curling in hot hatred, Rissa straightened her brief attire, sank into a lounge and began fixing her hair. Kola would have to get her another slave. Rissa paused a moment on the thought, then smiled faintly.

CHAPTER XIII

KOLA still stood glowering beside the balustrade. The colossal head umpire gestured with final authority and turned away. The decision was bitterly accepted by the Blue Backs and their exhorters, was whoopingly welcomed by the Yellow Legs and their supporters. The muttering crowd on the infield began breaking up into small groups.

Two dozen particularly huge Big Snakes separated from the others, trotted forward through a narrow gap in the low brow of hills along the valley edge. At the beginning of the jungle, they stood conferring a moment. A monstrous spike-backed and armor-plated green fellow was evidently leader of the scouts. At his direction the party quickly separated and slipped swiftly, stealthily into the jungle. So sinuously and low did the Big Snakes move that their passage could scarcely be detected even from the height of Twenty-five.

The gay holiday air continued on upper Sandcliff, except on the royal end of Twenty-five. Kagi was suddenly beside Kola, affable as ever, but those green eyes, had Kola noted, were colder than ever, were vengeful.

"Wonder who they'll get this time?" said Kagi.

Kola whirled, jerked an impatient hand at the old servant beside the apartment doorway. Old Lito vanished silently into the interior. Kola flopped into a lounge, impatiently waved Kagi into another.

"Those five trailers back yet?" asked Kola, shortly.

"No word of them from the collectors yet, Chief."

Kola frowned. "Any more berries yet?"

"Only that piece of Big Snake tail today."

Kola snarled. "That bunch dug out berries today!" He wasn't too sure. "They must have!" he growled.

"But they don't bring any in, Chief."

"Make them bring them in!"

Kagi was polite. "How?"

"That's up to you!"

Kagi was suave. "We've beat them and sent them back out, time after time," he explained. "But they just don't bring any back. They keep saying there isn't any more berries."

Kola snarled. "They're up to something! Don't let that gang out again!"

Kagi smiled depreciatingly. "Sure Chief! But what can they do? They only get those rotten red-headed things to go hunting with. We collect and keep them all again when the saps come back. We take all their berries. The fifty percent tax on everything else keeps them all starved. They haven't got anything any more. Without berries, without axes. . . ." Kagi smiled, shrugged expressively.

"How are the boys handling their berries?" asked Kola shortly.

"You can trust your lads, Chief," smiled Kagi.

"No leaks there?"

"The lads are smart, Chief."

Kola thought a moment. "Search the place lately?"

"Top to bottom yesterday." Kagi shrugged. "Nothing."

Kola growled, glowered. "Keep the lads ready!"

Kagi laughed soothingly. "Now

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don't be an old woman, Chief. Why," Kagi gestured eloquently, "if those saps downstairs ever try to start anything, your boys'll just cut them up too small to hang up."

Kola, flattered and reassured, smiled, but warned, "But be ready!"

"Sure, Chief," smirked Kagi. "Sure. We're always ready."

A SUDDEN angry jabbering came up from the valley. Kola glanced idly down, Kagi likewise. The Big Snakes scouts were gathered on the shore of the Hop, the floating carcass of their deceased fellow the center of discussion.

"Bit peeved," casually observed Kagi.

Kola merely grunted. His eyes narrowed. The scouts were splashing out into the Hop. They reached the remains of their late cohort, dragged it ashore, then promptly started back to the playing field with it. They traveled fast.

"Wonder what they'll do about it?" said Kagi.

Kola only grunted again, continued to watch narrow-eyed.

Through the cut in the hills and down onto the infield marched the scouts. The waiting Big Snake spectators and players hushed. The scouts tenderly put their burden down. The mass of Big Snakes came down and gathered around, inspecting the deceased. An angry murmuring began sweeping the Big Snakes. The big spike-backed leader of the scouts began addressing them. He pointed in the general direction of Sandcliff, then to his tail, then to his head. He made gestures of fighting, or collapsing and rolling over and over.

An ominous undercurrent rumbled through the mass of Big Snakes. They glowered toward Sandcliff. The huge-spike-back began waving his great forelimbs in anger, thumping his great spiked tail emphatically. The mass of Big Snakes responded in kind. The ominous rumbling increase. The big spike-back pointed climactically toward Sandcliff. The rumbling became an angrily demanding roar, and the whole mass of aroused Big Snakes whirled, left their deceased fellow lying feet up on the diamond, and began surging up the hills browing the valley. They broke into a trot as they poured over and down into the jungles of the valley. They gathered speed, broke into a mad stampede, heading straight for Sandcliff. Everything in their way was trampled flat. The air was filled with the terrific thundering of their angry coming. The ground quaked with it. Even Sandcliff began vibrating with the ominousness of it all.

People came rushing inquiringly from their apartments. On upper Sandcliff the gay holiday mood vanished. The huge reptiles were a sight to be pondered, streaming across the Big Brown now. Their deadliness of purpose was not lost on Kola. He rose, leaned over the balustrade.

"First terrace ladders up!" he roared to the pair beside the main speaking drum.

THE two drummers leaped into action. The giant drum throbbed deeply and imperiously. The first terrace officers and underlings raced out from under their awning. The ladders were being hauled up, being neatly folded, length upon length, in two stacks beside the balustrade. The rush ropes holding them to the balustrade were left tied and ready for paying down the ladders whenever the danger had passed. Ladders quickly in order, a small speaking drum on terrace One throbbed out, "Ladders up!"

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Kola, smiling faintly, derisively, was standing beside the balustrade of Twenty-five, watching the Big Snakes. Kagi was standing by Kola's side.

"Old things look mad enough to take this place apart," observed Kagi.

Kola spat in high irritation. "Don't be such a rat! Their old necks can't even reach the first terrace! Why, give them another . . ." His face suddenly alight with crude and unholy cunning, he looked down at Kagi suggestively.

A more thoughtful slyness had crept over Kagi's narrow features. "His Royal Highness?" he whispered, mocking the title.

Kola's mouth curled in agreement. "We'll let the Big Snakes holler around and beat their heads against the place for tonight—to soften up the saps. Then," he savored, "a little lottery."

Kagi smiled in admiration. "The lads have been waiting for this little job, Chief." He joined in Kola's soft laughter.

"Well, go and tip the lads!" directed Kola with high spirit.

Smiling suavely, Kagi nodded, turned and sauntered away, whistling softly. Kola's lips curled disdainfully as he watched the retreating Kagi a moment, then he turned and strode into One on Twenty-five.

CHAPTER XIV

IGNORING the open doorway on his left, to the side terrace, Kola strode for the right-hand doorway, to the corridor. He caught sight of a bare heel disappearing past the casing of this doorway and down the corridor. Kola stopped short.

"Lito!" he roared. "Lito!"

The old slave promptly came up the corridor, shuffled in, obediently humble. "Yes, Great Kola?"

Kola, spraddle-legged, fists on hips, glared down at the slave. "You were listening!"

Old Lito's eyes went wide, his mouth gaped innocently. "Listening, Great Kola? Listening to what? I do not understand."

Kola's lips curled. His great fist flashed, cracked. Old Lito spun backward over the low stone table, bounced from the far wall, sprawled onto the gleaming black floor. Snarling, Kola bounded over the table, with one huge hand grasped Old Lito around the waist, whisked the unconscious form overhead, threw it out through the foyer and main doorway. It struck the low balustrade off the projecting terrace, bent sharply backward and skidded over, was a dull thud on apparently Twenty-three, was heard to be promptly tossed by derisive warriors on down to Twenty.

His heavy lips curling with a short harsh laugh, Kola turned, strode into the corridor and down it past one and then another thin black stone door ajar into two bedrooms on his left. He stopped at the closed third and last door, also of black stone. On Kola's right, directly across the corridor from this door was a similar door, closed. He reached up near the door on his left, pressed a releasing masonry. The door swung silently into a large bedroom. He strode in, impatiently slammed the door behind him.

Light and air came into Kola's bedroom, as into the two other bedrooms off the corridor, through a pair of high narrow windows, now unshuttered. The windows were framed in heavy blue drapes and were set overhead in the west wall and overlooking the side terrace. The floor, walls and ceiling were of the black stone, the walls and ceiling colorful with inlay scenes and pictures. A huge bed, piled deep with woolly soft goatskins had its low, blackwood head

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against the south wall. A lounge and several chairs, goatskin-cushioned, added. In the center and completing the room was a great oval black stone table on which lay a huge battle-ax and a long and wickedly thin knife beside its corresponding scabbard.

Kola strode to the north wall, into which was inlaid the large picture of a grazing goat. Reaching out both hands, he pressed the goat's eyes, both at the same instant. Half the wall, the east section containing the goat's hind quarters, swung slowly and silently out and into the room.

KOLA stepped into the vault, began strolling about. His opaque blue eyes played narrowly over the wealth of Sandcliff. In cool, dry dimness the cavernous vault held almost countless stacks upon stacks of large leaf-wrapped pack of berries; leaf-protected half carcasses of goats, hanging row after row from racks of ceiling hooks; large sealed urns of goat oil for fire holders; bundle upon bundle of candles; bolt upon bolt of the shimmering blue cloth; ceiling-high piles of pliable goatskins, some woolly white, others tanned to creamy-white, still others tanned to a wool-free brown; spindles of strong white and blue thread; skeins of goat gut; coils of rope; packs of bone needles; urns of dye; piles of battle-axes and scabbarded knives; stone for jewelry, for more weapons; large bales of huge leaves for packaging; bundles of sticks of chalk, for writing on brown sheets of goatskin. There was also a length of Big Snake tail, leaf-wrapped dangling from a ceiling hook. Wealth—unbelievable wealth!

Back at the door again and apparently satisfied with his inspection, Kola grunted, relaxed in front of a stack of berry packs. Taking up one of the packs he carefully tore open a corner. Preserved berries, fresh, firm with juicy flesh, spilled into his waiting hand. He mouthed a full hand of them, resealed the pack and replaced it.

Chewing and swallowing coarsely, Kola strode back into his bedroom, reached down to the left fore hoof of the goat and pressed. The wall swung slowly closed. Kola turned, strode to the table in the center of the room. He picked up and strapped on his knife and scabbard, then took up the battle-ax and stood swinging the wicked weapon in blinding, flashing circles.

Last of the berries swallowed, Kola strode to the door, reached up and pressed a releasing masonry and the door swung in. He stepped out, closed the door, and strode up the corridor, back into the main room, out the west doorway and onto the side terrace.

Even Kola had to admire the way Rissa used this intimate retreat as a setting for her dark, seductive beauty. After pausing a moment, he strode up to where she lay in her lounge. He stood wide-legged, looking down at her. His heavy lips were curling a sardonic smile.

Rissa glanced up idly. "Well?"

"Big Snakes out for blood—from Sandcliff."

Rissa yawned lazily. "What did you expect—after Toka had to kill one of them?"

Kola's eyes narrowed, but he kept his mocking smile. "Still pretty hot for the guy, eh?"

Slight color mounted in Rissa's cheeks, but her voice was cool, was mildly taunting. "Could even the Great Kola, for instance, kill one of the Big Snakes?"

"I've never had to," mocked Kola.

"The great Kola no longer does anything," tinkled Rissa, "if he can get someone else to do it."

Kola laughed shortly. "Why should I get dirty any more?"

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"You're liable to get more than dirty," pointed out Rissa," from your dear Kagi."

Kola was only strangely amused. "You don't trust the fellow yet?"

Rissa's eyes, her voice, carried her hatred. "You know perfectly well I never have."

Kola laughed shortly. "But I can still use him. He's worth his keep—yet."

AT THE insinuated note, Rissa fixed her dark eyes speculatively upon her brother's arrogant face. "I wouldn't wait too long," she said.

Kola chuckled at Rissa's insinuation. "He been bothering you too much?"

"A little more," she snapped, "and it will be too much—for your dear Kagi." She let her right hand run idly along the waistband of her snug shorts, let her strong, long fingers lightly rest on an almost imperceptible long and narrow and pointed outline that blended into the hollow of her left hip.

Kola smiled at the gesture, then turned and stood beside the balustrade, gazed reflectively far down to the spongy green clearing flanking the west base of Sandcliff.

"I hear you need another slave," observed Rissa.

"The old rat was listening!"

"You'll have to get me a new slave too," she said.

Kola turned, eyed his sister mockingly. "Any particular one, this time, Princess Rissa?"

Rissa was buffing her long fingernails on a swatch of wooly white goatskin. She smiled faintly at her long, beautiful fingers. "Toka."

Kola's face twitched, his eyes glinted. Then he smiled slyly. "For the Princess, her dear Toka. For Kola . . ."

As Kola let it hang, Rissa frowned a moment, then she unfurrowed her brow.

Kola was laughing easily, savoringly.

His laughter subsiding, Rissa asked, "Those Big Snakes—what are you going to do about them now?"

"Throw them another sap and they'll go away."

"Who?" Rissa was careless as she carefully buffed her nails further.

Kola began laughing tauntingly. Rissa's downturned face went white under its golden tan. She stopped buffing, slowly looked up to her brother. He laid a huge hand on her bare shoulder, lowered his voice.

"There'll be a little lottery tomorrow. The name of every person in Sandcliff—even the great Kola's name—even the Princess Rissa's name—will be written on a slip of goatskin and dropped into the lottery urn. Then all will be mixed. Then," savored Kola, "the Princess Rissa will draw the—winner?"

"No!" Rissa was on her feet, hands clenched, dark eyes flashing, a picture of gorgeous female beauty aflame. "No! You won't do it! I won't let you!"

Kola stepped back a pace and roared with coarse laughter, then quieted to say insinuatingly, "But the winner, Princess Rissa, will not be your dear Toka. He's too valuable to me—and to you. Right?"

Rissa's hand stole to her pulsing throat. She questioned her mad brother with a sharp wild glance. He rocked with laughter.

CHAPTER XV

LEAVING Old Walloo to his deep slumber, Toka leaped up; raced out onto terrace Three. He stepped to the balustrade, but was not stunned by

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the sight. The Big Snakes were an angrily roaring river, sweeping irresistibly toward Sandcliff. Roya was beside Toka. She gripped his arm, looked up at him.

"That one was killed," explained Toka. "The rest are coming to avenge it."

"Toka!" gasped Roya. "The—" She caught herself, looked up and down the terrace.

Others, paces away, were at the balustrade watching the onrushing Big Snakes. Now and then these others turned anxiously toward Toka. It was no effort for him to be grave.

"The cache," whispered Roya, anxious.

Toka made his face a mask, hoped his own anxiety did not show too much.

A quick throbbing was suddenly on the air. The great drum on Twenty-four was speaking. "First terrace ladders up!"

Roya, white of face, looked up at Toka. "Be careful, my Toka," she whispered. "Be careful."

His whole being now sang as he put an arm across her shoulders, gave a slight squeeze of assurance.

Toka was aware of something plucking insistently at his knee. He looked down. A boy, one of those to whom he had given meat, was pleading up at him with wide, anguished eyes.

"Yes, Little Lito?" asked Toka.

"My grandfather," tremored Little Lito. He couldn't finish.

Toka guessed. "Bad?" he asked with quick compassion.

Little Lito nodded quickly. "He wants you, Toka. Right away."

Toka turned to Roya, spoke low. "Better stay inside, out of sight."

Roya nodded. With one reassuring pat on Little Lito's head, she hurried into her apartment and her own grandfather. Toka, careful to keep an attitude of tiredness, hurried along with Little Lito toward the near east stairway, started up to Old Lito's apartment on terrace Sixteen.

As Toka reached Ten, he saw the Big Snakes reach the base of Sandcliff, begin milling and trampling, striking viciously up at Sandcliff. They roared in anger, filled the air with a constant clamor that was tensing to the nerves. The Big Snakes couldn't reach the first terrace—yet. But they were not without an intelligence, however misdirected it might be at the moment.

Toka was helping Little Lito along now. The lad was weak from a long-inadequate diet. On terrace Twelve, Toka encountered Noola, leaning casually alone on the balustrade of the stairway landing. No one was within earshot. Toka merely slowed as he brushed close past. But he breathed the word, "Ready!"

Noola's eyes were all that replied.

As with Little Lito Toka mounted the next stairway, he saw Noola sauntering off.

ON TERRACE Sixteen at last, Toka let go Little Lito's hand, followed directly west for the Twenty-fifth apartment. The lad reached it first, darted in.

Toka was alert. The fire in the foyer was covered. After the foyer, the apartment was of two rooms, resembling Old Walloo's apartment. Old Lito lay, groaning softly, on the bare red floor of the main room. The usual water urn was nearby. Little Lito was instantly kneeling beside his grandfather's head. Toka checked the back room. It was empty.

"Hey, Gramps," called the lad. "Toka's here!" He said it as if the rectifier of all wrongs had arrived. But Old Lito merely groaned.

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Toka knelt, ran expert hands over the old body. Bruises, but there were no broken bones. The body structures of all Sandcliffians were remarkably resilient; bones seldom if ever fractured. But Old Lito was exhausted of strength, was badly worn out. More than anything, he needed food, needed it desperately.

"The meat?" asked Toka of Little Lito.

The lad's face twisted, his eyes filled. "The patrols . . ." He was bitter in frustration. "They took it away from me—and threw it away!"

Toka's jaw muscles knotted till they ached. He took up the urn of water, moistened Old Lito's dry mouth. The old man opened his eyes, tried to smile.

"Toka's here, Gramps!" said Little Lito again.

"Just rest, Old Lito," said Toka softly to the old man. "Soon, everything will be all right."

"Kola . . . " managed Old Lito. "A lottery . . . tomorrow . . . you . . . I heard . . . he saw . . ."

"Easy," soothed Toka. "Easy."

But Old Lito strained, "Couldn't find vault. . . . But his door . . . stone past upper left corner. . . . Door to court . . . upper right corner stone. . . ." Old Lito went slack. His breath was painfully labored as he breathed, "Sorry . . . Toka. . . ."

Toka gripped the wasted hands. "Priceless, Old Lito," he whispered. "Well done." He moistened the old lips with water. Then he and Little Lito could only make the old man as comfortable as possible on the bare stone floor.

Toka was acutely aware of the eyes of Little Lito wide upon him. Toka could only try to smile confidently. He was rewarded by seeing Little Lito suddenly lessen in anxiety and manage to smile too.

Toka knew there was nothing more he could do now, so he rose, reassuringly patted Little Lito on the head, then left him watching beside his old grandfather.

Out onto terrace Sixteen, Toka stepped to the balustrade, promptly noted the east elevator of terrace Twenty-five was waiting down on terrace Three. An uneasiness gripped him, hammered his mind. He tried to make himself believe it was just another of the never-ending searches that made a person's home no longer private. But he could not believe. It was too close to Roya.

Toka knew he must not display his concern. He made himself gaze thoughtfully out over the valley. In doing so he noted the Big Snakes had trampled a great swath straight to Sandcliff. He idly eyed the sky. It was a cloudless blue. The burning sun was now but one quarter from setting. There was no sign of any storm. He made himself realize there very seldom was any sign till immediately before a storm struck.

Toka eyed the Big Snakes milling and roaring around the base of Sandcliff. The monsters were growing steadily more angry. They had trampled all vegetation flat for a considerable semi-circular distance around the base. And most of the dense tangle concealing the rocky upthrusting near Sandcliff had been trampled. The rockiness was easily visible now. Toka's worried eyes saw that as yet none of the essential boulders had been disturbed.

CHAPTER XVI

KAGI paused at the entrance to his apartment, next to Kola's, some twenty paces separating. Kagi's expression mocked his latest slave, still standing motionless beside the doorway as

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ordered three hours before. The poor wretch was tall, large-boned, but now scarcely more than a skeleton. Kagi stood spraddle-legged in front the man, sneered up at the sweating, carefully expressionless face.

Two of the other men of Twenty-five, accompanied by their women, strolled up, stood looking on in amusement.

"Did he move a muscle while you were gone, Kagi?" asked one of the men.

"What muscle?" gibed one of the women, and the onlookers broke into raucous laughter.

An audience now to play to, Kagi struck his fist hard at his slave's face, drew blood from the nostrils. The slave's eyes reflected mental and physical agony. His knees quivered, perceptibly sagged. Kagi struck hard again. The poor slave's eyes glazed, his body slumped at Kagi's feet. As his appreciative audience laughed easily, Kagi viciously kicked the lolling head, gave a short laugh and strolled into his apartment.

The foyer, with bowl-covered fire hole, cookery utensils next to one wall, a plentiful supply of dry twigs, led into a spacious main room of luminescent walls and ceiling, beautiful with inlays of colored stone. The floor was red, was grooved to simulate blocks. A pair of lounges, several chairs, a fire holder and candles on a red stone table, completed the room.

Kagi sauntered on into the sizable second room, opening off the back of the main. He released the gut tie holding the white goatskin drape up to one side of the doorway. The drape ungathered, swished across the doorway. The drape was some six hands below the top of the doorway, allowing circulation of air and a dim illumination from the glowing main room—this second room being overlaid with plain black masonry. A large bed, goatskin piled, headed against the east wall. A chair, a lounge, another smaller red stone center table, and candles, completed. A medium size black battle-ax gleamed on the table, also a long thin knife, half in scabbard.

Kagi stepped to the east half of the back wall, pressed his hand on one of the black squares. The whole lower west quarter of the wall swung silently out. The vault was no more than a pace deep. Except for ten leaf-wrapped packs in one corner, it was bare. Kagi crouched, took out an already opened and resealed pack. He reopened a corner of it, spilled six berries into his hand. He hesitated a moment, then promptly mouthed the berries, carefully resealed the pack, replaced it, stood up, quietly swung the vault door shut.

Chewing and swallowing with savor, Kagi stepped to the table, took up his knife and its scabbard and strapped them on. He then took up his battle-ax and ducked past the drape, sauntered out onto Twenty-five. His slave was now just sitting up, holding his head.

"Get up!" snarled Kagi. He gave a viciously prodding kick. The slave struggled to his feet, swayed unsteadily. "Now get inside and clean the place up!" snarled Kagi. He watched the slave shuffle obediently inside.

KAGI turned and stepped to the balustrade, disdainfully eyed the Big Snakes milling and roaring around the base of Sandcliff. His cold green eyes glinted, his lips went into a thin sardonic smile as he also saw a familiar figure and a starved boy hurrying up the stairway from terrace Ten to Eleven.

Kagi turned. Swinging his ax easily, he strolled east on Twenty-five. He paused several times, gathered the men around in small groups and held whis-

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pered conferences. Always, at the end of each meeting, broad smiles were exchanged. On his way Kagi nodded and smiled condescendingly at the women, sauntered importantly past them.

At the east elevator of Twenty-five, Kagi stopped and chatted affably with the operators, two up in the recess that housed the boom and winches, a third, the head operator, who stood out on the stair landing and directed the other two.

A scant moment, and Kagi was joined by two heavy brutes of men, his escorts, armed with knives and full size battle-axes gleaming wickedly black. Kagi nodded approvingly, then smiled.

"Just a little inspection trip, boys," he explained. "Won't keep you from your regular fun for long."

The pair grinned deferentially, knowingly, as the elevator was made ready—the boom slightly let out, the sling lowered to the landing area.

"You two first," directed Kagi.

The pair of escorts slipped onto the seat, a half-round length of palm limb flattening the bottom of a loop of rope. The pair filled the seat. They steadied themselves by each grasping one hand to a side rope of the sling.

The head operator checked his two fellows up in the recess. They were braced at the wooden cranks of the winches. One was ready to unwind further the rope that would let out further and down the long boom that was axled into the floor of the recess. The other operator was ready to unwind further the hoisting and lowering rope, when once the sling had been properly boomed out.

"Down to Three!" called the head operator from his post beside the stair landing balustrade.

The long boom swung down and out to almost level away, and the sling was lowered swiftly away. The escorts off onto Three, the sling was quickly hoisted and boomed back onto Twenty-five. Kagi slipped onto the seat, held his ax with one hand, grasped the side of the loop with the other hand.

"Keep it to us," he directed the head operator.

The man nodded. Under his quick orders the sling was again boomed out and lowered swiftly away to Three.

Kagi's pair of escorts assisted him from the seat. The quartet of patrols for terrace Three were also obediently present.

"What's the news?" asked Kagi of their leader, a flat-nosed sinewy ugly.

"He brought 'em a chunk of Big Snake tail meat," factually reported Flat Nose. "He stayed a while, came out with the dame to see the Big Snakes coming. A kid, Old Lito's grandkid, came along and got him to run off upstairs for something. The girl went back inside. So far, nothing else."

Kagi grunted noncommittally. "We'll have a little look around the place." He led the way east, toward apartment Seventy-five.

CHAPTER XVII

THEN it was as if Roya had desperately called his name. Toka's eyes swung narrowly down to the sling waiting on terrace Three. His emotions raged, but he made himself outwardly casual as he stepped to the west stairway leading down from Sixteen. He knew he had to hurry, yet not overly so or he'd attract the attention of ever-watching patrols on every terrace of Sandcliff. He kept his eyes on terrace Three where apartment Seventy-five opened onto it.

As Toka reached Ten, he saw the four patrols of terrace Three appear from Seventy-five, followed immediately by two men of Twenty-five whom he knew as the habitual escorts of Kagi.

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The six men immediately took up guard about the entrance to Seventy-five. Kagi was inside, alone with Roya and the helpless Old Walloo. The call in Toka's mind was suddenly vivid, urgent. But he fought himself to keep his rapid but surfacely unworried descent. He could never get past the six guards if they were warned.

Finally on terrace Four, and no warning apparently given, it was all Toka could do to make himself go carelessly east to his own bare apartment, Forty-six. There was nothing there to get; the move was only to throw off guard the patrols watching him from the far west end of terrace Four. A moment inside and he ambled out, strolled casually, silently, on east along terrace Four. He kept just far enough in from the balustrade to be unnoticed by the guards below on Three.

Through the roaring of the Big Snakes, Toka's supersharp ears picked up the voices of the six guards. The remarks were lewdly related to Kagi and Roya. Toka flamed inside, fought himself cool. He was directly over Seventy-five now. By their voices he determined the positions of the guards, one close on either side of the doorway, the four others angling outward to either side toward the balustrade.

Toka stopped, feigned casual gazing out over the valley. He was aware of the patrols on the west end of Four eyeing him suspiciously. His acute hearing filtered out the Big Snakes' constant roaring, the lewd conversations of the six guards. He tried to imagine himself inside Seventy-five, and what was taking place.

Toka suddenly went flaming mad at what his ears picked up. With anger-given strength he sprang over the balustrade, dropped directly in front of the doorway. The six guards, surprised, sprang into violent action.

CHAPTER XVIII

KAGI led the way boldly into the foyer of apartment Seventy-five on Three. The few food utensils and dry twigs were neat beside the covered fire hole. The main room, too, was empty. Roya suddenly appeared in the doorway to the back room. She was calm under the devouring gazes of the smirking intruders.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Just dropped in for a little neighborly visit," replied Kagi. "How is your dear grandfather?" He was falsely solicitous.

"Sleeping," replied Roya.

"Too bad we have to disturb him," observed Kagi. He stepped toward Roya. The rest of his party shuffled forward, ready.

Roya hesitated, then stepped back to her grandfather's side. Kagi and his sextet crowded the small room. Their eyes darted searchingly over the ceiling, walls and floor, played lecherously over the underclad Roya. She remained calm, aloof.

Old Walloo calmly awoke, saw the intruders. He remained calm, lay relaxed. But his eyes were as cold as his voice.

"What is it this time, Kagi?"

"Just dropped in to see how Roya and you were making out," smiled Kagi.

"No better than most," replied Old Walloo.

"Big Snake meat is strengthening," insinuated Kagi.

"So are berries," replied Old Walloo.

"You've had some of those too?" smiled Kagi.

"I haven't dined on Twenty-five lately," dryly replied Old Walloo.

"What a pity!" mocked Kagi. His green eyes played at Roya. "Your beautiful granddaughter should have that pleasure."

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"I'm sure she prefers this lower level," replied Old Walloo.

Kagi looked around the room elaborately, importantly. "This place could be improved," he observed in assumed sympathy.

"Possibly," replied Old Walloo.

"Mind if we look it over?" asked Kagi.

"You are seven," said Old Walloo. "We are two."

Kagi turned to his sextet, was mockly solicitous. "Take a little look around, boys, and see if there is anything we can do for them."

The sextet smirked, quickly set to tapping lightly the walls, the ceiling and floor with their battle-axes. Everything echoed solid. Only Old Walloo's corner, the northeast, was left. The visitors paused suggestively. The old man, with Roya's help, sat up, then strained to his feet and shuffled off to one side. His arm was across Roya's shoulders for support, her arm around his waist.

The old goatskin that was Old Walloo's bed was impatiently kicked away. Then Kagi's two escorts began working the corner. They came unsuccessfully down the walls, began on the floor. One simulated square promptly echoed hollow. Kagi and his party smiled suggestively at Old Walloo and Roya. The girl and her grandfather were casual of expression.

"You don't happen to know the combination?" smiled Kagi.

"I'm not the one who finished this apartment," replied Old Walloo. His breathing was labored now.

"You didn't know it was there?" smiled Kagi.

"We don't go snooping around for secrets," replied Roya.

"I'm sure you don't," said Kagi. He turned to his party. "See if you can possibly find the combination for the dear girl."

ONE of the two escorts began pressing his hands in various combinations on nearby squares, around the walls of the corner, on the floor about the hollowly echoing square. There was no response. One after another of the other searchers then tried, likewise failed. Then Kagi impatiently handed his ax to an escort, himself confidently began fingering and pressing surrounding squares. As try after try failed, he grew more irritated, flushed of face. He finally straightened up, faced Old Walloo and Roya. His eyes, his voice, drilled.

"How does this vault open?"

After a sufficiently impertinent moment, Roya quietly observed, "You didn't try the square itself—yet."

Kagi's jaws snapped. His narrow face a burning red, he barked at one of his escorts, "Open it up!"

The man promptly swung his battle-ax hard, broad end down, onto the square. The square jumped, splintered, its pieces clattered on the floor. The escort impatiently kicked them away, then with Kagi and the rest promptly knelt and peered into the vault. It was scarcely two hands deep, was empty to exploring hands.

Kagi and his thwarted party stood up, narrowly eyed Roya and Old Walloo, who was near exhausted with the effort of standing. Roya was quietly unexpressive.

"Wait outside!" snapped Kagi to his party. They hurried out. Kagi stood swinging his battle-ax idly. He smiled undecidedly at Roya.

"May my grandfather lie down now?" asked Roya.

"Why not?" mocked Kagi.

"Will you please spread the skin in the northwest corner?" asked Roya.

"Of course, my dear!" said Kagi. He kicked the bits of stone back into the floor vault, retrieved the goatskin and

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spread it in the northwest corner of the room, then stood back elaborately and bowed.

Roya helped Old Walloo back to his relocated bed, arranged him comfortably, ran her hand soothingly over the old brow. The old man sighed exhaustedly, closed his eyelids. Roya straightened up, eyed Kagi steadily.

"May my grandfather rest now?"

"We won't disturb him from the other room?" suggested Kagi.

"I wouldn't know," quietly replied Roya.

"Let's find out," smiled Kagi. He swung his wicked ax idly, suggestively close to Old Walloo.

Roya led the way into the main room, made to keep going on into the foyer. Kagi laid a staying hand on her arm. She turned, shrugged off the hand. She coolly eyed Kagi.

Smiling, he waved a hand to indicate the barrenness of the apartment and all it stood for. "You could get out of this."

"I prefer this to the getting out," replied Roya steadily. She was quivering ever so slightly under the devouring eyes.

"I could do plenty for a girl like you," suggested Kagi.

"You could go on about your business," suggested Roya.

"An excellent suggestion!" Kagi laughed softly.

ROYA stepped quickly toward the foyer. Kagi promptly let his ax clatter to the floor. He reached out, spun the girl back into the room, yanked her roughly to him. Roya fought desperately, silently against the foul pawing and embracing. But Kagi, still laughing softly, easily, was strong with berries. He finally held Roya's arms tight to her sides. But her hair flew in wildly flailing strands about her face as she frantically continued to roll her

head from side to side, strained it back, fought vainly away from mouthing lips.

A sudden commotion darkened the foyer. Roya was torn from Kagi. A venomous fist cracked on his jaw, instantly followed by a tornado of avenging fists. Kagi and his attacker went down under an avalanche of viciously fighting bodies.

Horrified, weak, grateful, her hand at her throbbing throat, Roya watched from the southeast corner of the room, near the foyer. She made out the four patrols of terrace Three, the two escorts of Kagi, at the bottom Kagi himself. Another head and torso momentarily appeared down there. Toka. Roya's heart filled her breast, with exultation, with wild clammy fear. But she made her hand a silencing fist on her mouth as she stared in wide-eyed anguish.

Kagi suddenly squirmed free, stood gleefully watching the battle continue. Toka fought insanely to follow Kagi. He battled to his feet. He was a dripping red devil, one eye puffed purple. But the remaining six opponents, mouthing curses, concentrated furiously on him. Heavy fists flailed, pistoned, splatted in a mingled tattoo of ruthless punishment. Toka fought back, but powerful muscles of berry-strong bodies leaped, writhed, strained. Toka reeled, went, down heavily under the savage attack.

Roya darted into the foyer, snatched up the crude food knife from beside the

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fire, raced back to the churning bodies atop Toka. Before the suddenly snarling Kagi could reach her, she drove the knife savagely, blindly twice to the handle, was verging on a third time when the raging Kagi hurled her violently into a corner of the room. She gave a small cry as her head struck from the wall, then she slumped limp.

Old Walloo came crawling in from the back room. With a mocking laugh, Kagi leaped, kicked the old man hard in the face. Kagi's stone toecap bit viciously. Old Walloo sank prone in the doorway, bled freely from the mouth. Kagi viciously kicked him again and again. Old Walloo ceased groaning, lay still, profusely bloody, silent.

Kagi turned back to the main battle. It was ended. Toka was a bloody body sprawled on the floor against one wall. Flat Nose lay silent on his back in the center of the room in a growing pool of blood. The rest of the party were bending concernedly over him. They themselves were not without marks of Toka's mad fists. Kagi gave the survivors of his party a quick, unconcerned glance, gave the same to Flat Nose.

"She pulled that trick before I could stop her," Kagi explained. He indicated Flat Nose. "Take him to the elevator. One of you patrols ride up with him to the aid station on Twenty-one."

Quick nods acknowledged the order, and the bleeding Flat Nose was lifted and borne out.

"We'll leave these here," Kagi waved a careless hand at the unconscious Roya, Toka and Old Walloo, "—for now." He gave a short derisive laugh, then followed his party out to the waiting east elevator, saw the stabbed Flat Nose aboard.

Accompanied by his two escorts, Kagi then started down the east stairway to terrace Two, and thence on to One.

CHAPTER XIX

KAGI and his two escorts stepped onto terrace One. Kagi stepped to the balustrade, disdainfully eyed the angrily roaring mass of Big Snakes, thrashing and milling about below. They were growing steadily more ugly at their inability to reach even the first terrace. The stench of their angry breaths was heavy on the air, mingled with the usual strong body odor that emanated from them.

A moment, and Kagi sauntered along west to apartment Fifty, the collector's office. He left his escorts outside, then strolled in through the foyer, into the main room with one red stone table in the center and several decrepit chairs about. Red Eye and Broken Nose and their four underlings promptly stood up, waited.

Kagi indicated the four assistants. "Outside. And help keep this place clear."

The quartet nodded and left, axes in hands. Kagi settled himself into one of the old goat-leather-and-willow chairs, waved Red Eye and Broken Nose to do likewise. Kagi glanced briefly at the several poor grade red-headed battle-axes tossed into a corner of the room.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"Half for sure," reported Red Eye. "The rest will follow when it starts."

Kagi smiled his pleasure.

"How about the berry angle?" asked Broken Nose anxiously.

Kagi waved a depreciatory hand. "I have found his vault. And," he smirked, "its combination."

Red Eye and Broken Nose licked their loose lips at that news.

"But you didn't come down here to tell us that," said Red Eye. His eyes were shrewd on Kagi.

Kagi was complimentary. "Smart man, Red Eye."

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"We're ready to go?" asked Broken Nose in anticipation.

"Tomorrow," replied Kagi with savor.

His two listeners leaned forward, tense, eager.

"Spill it," whispered Red Eye.

Kagi leaned back. "Those Big Snakes," he explained easily, "require a victim. Our Great Kola," Kagi smiled, with Red Eye and Broken Nose, "is going to let the Big Snakes soften up the saps tonight. Tomorrow, we're to have a little lottery."

"And the winner?" asked Red Eye.

"Our Great Kola," said Kagi, "thinks it will be one Toka. But I'll see the urn tomorrow morning, after our Great Kola visits it. And our boys will be well placed, of course, for the fun that will follow."

Red Eye and Broken Nose leaned back, folded their hands on their hard-muscled bellies, smiled happily.

"Need I say more?" smirked Kagi.

"Oh, there are a few things," replied Red Eye.

"Such as?" asked Kagi.

"Just what do we get out of it?"

Kagi blandly smiled. "Besides a thousand berries for each of you, what?"

Red Eye's heavy face flooded red, twitched. "That Toka!"

"Yours," agreed Kagi. "Anything else?" He eyed Broken Nose.

Broken Nose's lips began working. "Roya!"

Kagi's eyes now drilled, his voice bore a chill. "Mine."

Broken Nose was flustered, frowning.

Kagi smiled thinly, insinuated, "The haughty Rissa will be available—shortly after."

Broken Nose's loose lips quivered, slobbered. His black eyes burned. He nodded avidly.

Kagi rose, smiled. "Anything else?"

Red Eye gazed thoughtfully at Broken Nose a moment, then turned to Kagi and protested in coarse humor, "You guys get dames to play around with, and I get a smart aleck rat!"

Kagi joined in Broken Nose's foul laughter. "Why, Red Eye!" mocked Kagi. "Don't tell me they're becoming that scarce!"

Lecherous laughter in his ears, Kagi sauntered out and east toward his elevator, now waiting for him on terrace One. His escorts trailed.

CHAPTER XX

KOLA swaggered from his apartment and out onto his projecting section of terrace Twenty-five. He paused beside the balustrade. His eye was instantly alerted by the east elevator hoisting a bleeding patrol leader, whom he recognized as Flat Nose, and an attendant, whom he recognized as an assistant patrol of terrace Three. Bellowing the east elevator and its load on up to Twenty-five, Kola strode swiftly to meet them. Others on Twenty-five followed with aroused curiosity.

The sling was boomed in and onto Twenty-five. Flat Nose, dripping red from two ugly knife wounds in the back, had regained a semblance of consciousness. Everyone stood waiting, wondering.

"Well," roared Kola to two nearby men of Twenty-five, "take him to our station and tie him up and give him a dozen berries!"

"Right, Chief!" snapped the designated pair, and promptly bore the bleeding Flat Nose away toward Twenty-five's aid station.

Kola beckoned for the assistant patrol to stay. The man faced Kola nervously.

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"Well," growled Kola, "what happened?"

The man glanced nervously around at the onlookers, as though searching for some moral support there. He seemed to find none.

"Speak up!" roared Kola.

"We was searching Seventy-five on Three," hurriedly replied the assistant patrol. "They squawked. We had a scrap. The dame stuck a knife in Flat Nose."

Kola stood spraddle-legged, sneering. The assistant patrol shifted uneasily; sweat broke on his brow.

"An old man," mocked Kola, "and a girl. Both half starved—against four patrols!"

"Oh, but—" The man caught his tongue.

"But what!" roared Kola.

The man was cowed. "Kagi and his men were there too!" he blurted.

"So!" mocked Kola. "Seven against two!"

"Three!" blurted the flustered assistant.

"Three?" asked Kola, puzzled. "What three!" he roared.

The assistant trembled violently, his eyes rolled, his tongue tried to wet his lips. He knew he was caught in his own web. "Toka started it all!" he blurted.

KOLA'S eyes glinted, then he roared with raucous laughter. The assistant patrol, believing he had somehow pleased the great one and protected Kagi, tried to smile. But Kola suddenly scowled darkly, flashed a huge fist. The fawning assistant cracked to the surface of Twenty-five.

"Lying rat!" sneered Kola, standing over the cringing man.

"But it's true, Great Kola!" protested the man.

"Well, where are they now?" roared Kola.

"Kagi and his men?" asked the man.

"No, you fool!" raged Kola. He gave the man a vicious kick on the ribs. The stone toecap bit deep. The man yelped, groaned. "Toka, the girl and the old man!" roared Kola. "Where are they now!"

"Still in Seventy-five on Three," groaned the man. "Out cold!"

Kola whirled, pointed to a pair of the powerfully built men among the onlookers. "Split Lip! Scar Belly! Take this elevator down to Seventy-five on Three and bring that Toka and girl to the court!"

"Right, Chief!" The pair stepped forward from their women.

"Take your axes!" directed Kola.

"Right, Chief!" The pair darted into their nearby apartments, immediately reappeared, armed with flashing black battle-axes and knives. They slipped aboard the east elevator, were swiftly boomed out and lowered away.

Kola sneered down at the groaning assistant patrol. "Get back to your terrace at once!"

The man struggled to his feet, face twisting in pain.

"And take the stairs!" roared Kola with a prodding kick.

The man limped hurriedly down the east stair, stifling his groaning, holding his side.

Kola turned to the head elevator operator. "Send Kagi to me when he comes up."

"Right, Chief!"

Kola strode back west toward his apartment.

CHAPTER XXI

TOKA groped his way achingly up through darkness, on into spinning colored light, on into a consciousness of lying flat on his back on a hard, vibrating, grooved surface! A constant

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distant thundering of roarings and flounderings, a nearby low moaning, came to his ears. Then also a quiet sobbing.

He recalled the wild nightmare following his plunge to Roya's aid. He made himself remain limp as he carefully opened his eyelids. Though a natural dimness, he saw a red-grooved ceiling. He slowly rolled his head to the right. Only the familiar figure of the scant-clad Roya, her blond tresses falling in soft waves, her back to him. She was bending anxiously over her old grandfather. The low moaning was coming from Old Walloo with each labored breath. The quiet sobbing came from Roya as she dabbed a swab of goatskin, moistened from the nearby water urn, over Old Walloo's face.

Toka looked around carefully, saw this was the main room of Seventy-five on Three. He tried his legs and arms slightly. They ached with the little movement. His movements had made a soft stir. Roya quickly turned with a drawn look. Toka quickly smiled reassuringly. But even his facial muscles protested.

"Oh, Toka," whispered Roya in a mixture of gladness and anxiety that strangely warmed Toka.

"Look after Old Walloo first," he directed. "I'm all right." He struggled to his feet. He made himself smile as his beaten body screamed in every muscle, every nerve. But Roya was beside him, her arm steadyingly, thrillingly around him. "Old Walloo," he protested.

Roya put a cool hushing finger on his mouth. "All I can—for now," she whispered. "I gave him a sip of water, and bathed his face too."

Toka felt of his own face. It was not crusted with blood, as it should be, nor was his body. He looked down into Roya's eyes. In their blue depths he found the answer. Roya's eyes remained steady into his. Old Walloo's groaning quickly recalled Toka from his dream.

"I'll get him back to his bed," said Toka quietly. "You fix some broth and meat for him."

"I'll help you," replied Roya.

Together they tenderly lifted and carried the groaning old man into the back room and laid him on his poor bed. Roya fussed lovingly, anxiously a moment. Old Walloo's eyelids fluttered open.

"Got to help," he mumbled dazedly. "Got to help . . . Roya. . . ."

"I'm all right, dear," soothed Roya. She ran her hand over the old brow.

Old Walloo's eyes fixed on Roya's face. "Roya. . . ."

"I'm all right, Gramps," soothed Roya. "And Toka's here."

The old eyes found Toka and lighted.

"Everything will be all right, Old Walloo," smiled Toka. He was inwardly raging.

"Now go to sleep, my old dear," soothed Roya, "while we fix you some more broth and meat."

The old eyelids fluttered shut. The bruised mouth smiled. The old man breathed deep, slept. Roya and Toka quietly left.

IN THE main room, Toka touched Roya's arm. She faced him questioningly. He pointed to the northeast corner of the room, on the floor there. Roya's eyes followed. The old food knife lay there, red-black with drying blood. Roya looked up at Toka steadily. Again he found an answer in the blue depths of those eyes. He reached out, drew Roya gently to him. She didn't resist. He softly, reverently stroked her golden hair. She put her arms around his neck, gave herself to his tightening embrace. She closed

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her eyes and gave completely, hungrily to his own hungry lips.

"Well!" mocked a harsh voice. "How lovely!" Short, low, mocking laughter followed.

Toka whirled, thrust Roya behind him. Sauntering in from the foyer were two powerfully muscled men from Twenty-five. The lower lip of one was split, slobbered loosely. The other intruder bore a jagged white scar from left shoulder to right hip. Their black battle-axes were idly swinging, ready for action.

"What do you want?" demanded Toka.

"You and the dame!" snarled Split Lip. He indicated the foyer with a swing of his ax. "Come on!"

"What for?" demanded Toka.

"Get goin'!" snarled Scar Belly, giving a shove with his ax. "Before I sink this thing in your thick head!"

Resistance now would be worse than useless. Flicking his gaze to Roya, seeing she understood, Toka moved easily ahead into the foyer.

"You, too, sister!" leered Split Lip.

Toka was aware of Roya close behind.

Out on terrace Three, Toka easily inquired, "And now what, boys?"

"Up!" mocked Scar Belly, herding them toward the east stairway. "Up! And we all walk!"

Toka put Roya shieldedly ahead of him. The party started up.

"Sure this little walk won't be too hard on you boys?" inquired Toka.

"Better worry about yourself, pretty boy!" mocked Split Lip.

"And your dame!" added Scar Belly.

Toka felt his face blanch. His jaw muscles knotted. He shot the pair a look over his shoulder. They laughed, softly, lewdly, and one gave him a sharp prod with an ax. The ascent continued in silence.

The strain soon told on Roya. She allowed Toka to help her.

WHILE climbing to Ten, Toka saw Kagi and his escorts hoisted from terrace One to Twenty-five. Toka did not miss Kagi's sudden surprise at seeing this procession climbing toward upper Sandcliff. Apparently all was not coordinated between apartments One and Twenty-five and the other holders of the conquest. Toka pondered the new probabilities and possibilities of this. The ascent continued without incident.

On each terrace, though, white drawn faces watched the procession, then fell into expressions of unfeigned despair, turned away. But Toka and Roya remained calm of expression. Roya's breathing was becoming labored, but she never faltered. Apparently, if she could help it, she wouldn't give Scar Belly and Split Lip the satisfaction. Those two uglies were leering, mocking of expression and manner.

Around the base of Sandcliff, the Big Snakes were roaring and thrashing, leaping and snapping in steadily mounting anger and stubbornness. Toka glanced down at them once from Twenty. He saw a huge spike-back leap, saw those great snapping jaws not quite reach terrace One. Sandcliff vibrated continuously from such efforts. Toka had no confidence the monsters would not soon reach that first terrace.

Toka also noted with scant satisfaction that the once secret rocky upcropping was as yet intact. It was, so far, sufficiently far enough back from the main meleeing.

Toka eyed the sun. It was nearing resting. In scarce one hour would come the lightly purpling twilight, deepening slowly into night. There was yet no sign of storm.

As the procession passed terraces

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Twenty-one, -two and -three, the gibes were openly ribald. Toka surfacely ignored them, saw Roya was able to do likewise.

CHAPTER XXII

THE procession was mounting the east stairway to Twenty-four now. Only long hardening strains of the hunt kept Toka erect. The aching of his muscles had been worked out with the climb. Roya was now leaning heavily on him. But even Split Lip and Scar Belly were at last showing signs of the climb; their breath was labored, their manner no longer so swaggering.

Finally on Twenty-four Toka and Roya were promptly herded to the nearest doorway and through it and into the great court of Sandcliff, were started down an aisle, Split Lip and Scar Belly close behind.

Except for an empty long storeroom on the west end and a long workshop on the east end, the court took all the terrace. Ten black-stone-doored archways opened into the court and led into as many aisles. Inside every closed archway a pair of armed guards lounged ready. The court itself was ceilinged and walled with the white stone masonry that gave off an illuminating glow. The floor and row after row of plain benches, scatteringly filled with the arrogant glittering company of Twenty-five and the slightly lesser of Twenty-one, -two and -three, were of gleaming black stone. All aisles converged to a large clear area around a raised black dais at the back of the tremendous court.

Down an east aisle walked the prisoners. Toka was heartened to see Roya had now recovered somewhat and leaned only lightly on his arm. Split Lip and Scar Belly remained close behind. Toka noted Roya was as he, never changing expression as they approached the huge semicircular dais.

Toka estimated the position. Upon the center of the dais was an elaborate white throne upon which sprawled Kola, a smirking, hairless human snake. Just back of his throne, a heavy blue drapery covered a doorway to the small room where were kept the urns for lotteries. The articles for a lottery were not in sight, so Toka judged this was not to be one of those farces. But upon a throne similar to Kola's, and to Kola's right, languished the exotic Rissa. In a lesser throne on Kola's left sat Kagi with perpetual faint sneer. Flanking the three and in various sittings of lazy expectancy in plain white stone chairs were some score high-ranking others of Twenty-five. All the men were armed, their axes resting beside chairs, knives strapped at waists.

Still lightly supporting Roya with his arm, Toka came to a stop at the bottom of the six semicircular steps leading to the dais. As Kola eyed Roya and him, Toka pondered the man's quirks. He was licentious, yet had, so far as Toka knew, never been involved with a woman other than Rissa.

"Separate *them!*" Kola's bellow echoed in the near-empty court.

Split Lip and Scar Belly roughly thrust Toka and Roya five paces apart. Split Lip remained a pace behind Toka, Scar Belly the same distance back of Roya. Toka eyed him anxiously. She was standing straight now, as if having obtained some new source of inner strength for this moment.

TOKA returned expressionless eyes to the dais. Those up there looked down mockingly. Toka could feel like looks at his back. He was uncomfortably aware of Rissa's faint smile, her dark eyes sultry upon him, going minutely over him. He was aware of Kola

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and the rest of the men as lewdly devouring Roya. Toka estimated Kagi's gaze the wildest of all. The sounds of the angry Big Snakes muffledly echoed through the closed court. Toka shot another glance at Roya. She was straight, staring straight ahead as into space. Toka shifted slightly, waited.

"A man has been stabbed," began Kola, his voice coarse, insinuating, "—in the back!"

Toka waited. Roya never changed.

"That is too bad!" mocked Kola.

No one spoke. Those on the dais and in the audience were lazily enjoying the farce.

"The people of Sandcliff have laws!" mocked Kola. "And the laws have penalties for their violation!"

Toka could have yawned elaborately, but taunting the easily enraged Kola now could only make matters worse for all of them.

"A man stabbed!" repeated Kola. "By two people!" His lips curled in anticipation. "A term of slavery is the minimum penalty," he insinuated. "And I can't see how we can make exceptions, even," his eyes running over Roya, "for one so fair!"

Toka let his eyes wander warningly to Roya. She was a golden-haired statue of pride, of insufficiently clothed beauty needing but good food for a while to be completely ravishing beyond the pale of any woman in Sandcliff. If she took his warning, she gave no sign of it. Toka turned to the dais. He spoke casually.

"Why sentence two for the crime committed by only one?" Toka saw Rissa's eyes burn quickly from him to Roya.

Kola smiled indulgently. "The crime committed by whom?" he asked.

"Me," replied Toka easily.

Kola and his satellites laughed.

"The brave Toka," mocked Kola, feigning shock, "now stabs his fellow men in the back?"

"Hardly fellow men," replied Toka.

Easy laughter came again from the dais and audience.

"Well," elaborately observed Kola to the others on the dais, "since we have the brave Toka's confession of guilt, there seems nothing left but to pass sentence on him!"

"I stabbed your filthy patrol," calmly announced Roya. "And you know it."

Kola roared with laughter. Toka sought desperately to warn Roya with his eyes.

"This whole trial," quietly continued Roya, "is a mockery." The dais silenced to amused smiles before Roya's sarcasm. "It's nothing more," continued Roya, now contemptuous, "than another senseless whim of an ignorant brat."

THE courtroom perked up, was looking quizzically to Kola. He was momentarily silenced by Roya's unexpected spirit, but he was becoming a thundercloud.

"Look at him," laughed Roya, pointing disdainfully. "And he calls himself a man!"

"Silence, you filthy wench!" roared Kola. He was on his feet, livid with rage. But he was uncertain of action. Evidently things were not going as he'd expected.

Roya seemed completely unafraid. She laughed now, was seemingly unaware of Toka's entreating glances. But her manner had now puzzled to silence those on the dais and in the audience. The show was Kola's to run, and he seemed to have lost the strings somewhere.

"Well," smiled Roya, "why doesn't the Great Kola sentence me?"

During it all, Rissa had remained

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quiet, cool, seemingly aloof. Now her eyes burned frankly over Toka, making him again feel naked. Rissa rose. Smiling shrewdly, she spoke to the mentally floundering Kola so all could hear, and Toka knew she had seen through Roya's strategy from the start.

"May I offer counsel, Great Kola?" asked Rissa. Her voice was liquidly musical.

Kola shot her a black look. "Well?"

"Since both of them admit the crime," suggested Rissa, "both would seem to be guilty."

Kola's face quickly took on the cunning of Rissa's point, the point he had started out to make. "Go on, Princess Rissa!" he encouraged.

"Some of Twenty-five," reminded Rissa, "are without servants at the present time."

The cunning Kagi quickly interposed with, "Yes! Many of us require new servants, Great Kola!"

Kola turned, mocked, "Such as?"

"The Great Kola's trusted right hand, for one," fawned Kagi.

A titter went through the courtroom. Toka's control snapped. Enraged, he made to leap for the dais and Kagi, but Split Lip and Scar Belly were ready and promptly had his arms pinned. They held him, expertly applied pressure, amid gales of raucous laughter. Toka saw the uselessness of it, stood quiet again, nauseated from the foul handling given him. Scar Belly returned back of Roya. Wisely, she had not moved.

Kola now stood at the front edge of the dais, spraddle-legged, fists on hips, sneering down at the accused. He waved to Split Lip and Scar Belly.

"Take them to One on Twenty-five!"

Rissa's eyes were contemptuous of Roya, were again sultry on Toka as she turned and was followed by Kola through the draped doorway back of Kola's throne.

Split Lip and Scar Belly were herding Toka and Roya back up a west aisle. Toka anxiously eyed Roya. She was faintly smiling, seemingly unconcerned. She gazed reassuringly at him a moment, smiled but did not speak. Toka marveled, forced himself to smile.

Toka was also aware of every movement in the great court. The satellites Kola and Rissa had left on the dais were trailing out and up other aisles in two's and three's with the others of Twenty-five and some from Twenty-one, -two and -three. There was coarse and tinkling laughter, ribald joking at Kola's little entertainment.

But Kagi stalked alone, Toka noted, and there was intense malevolence on those narrow features.

CHAPTER XXIII

SPLIT LIP and Scar Belly halted Toka and Roya just quarter way inside the spacious main room. Kola and Rissa were lazing in lounges drawn up to either side the great stone center table. Toka was aware of Rissa smiling languidly upon him as she nibbled a large berry. Kola frankly eyed Roya as he carelessly tossed one berry of a half handful into his mouth. With his other hand he toyed with his vicious black battle-ax.

"Here you are, boys!" he offered. "Twenty berries apiece!"

Split Lip and Scar Belly stepped up with broad smiles and received the tokens with, "Thanks, Chief!"

Kola waved them a dismissal. They left, with a final mocking sneer for Toka and a last frank appraisal of Roya.

Toka, Roya beside him, stood waiting. Roya, too, was glancing absently about the large main room. Toka tried to conceal his acute awareness of Ris-

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sa's eyes upon him, of his scant rags of attire. Too, he tried to conceal his inward raging at Kola's lustful eyeing of underclad Roya. But Roya remained on the surface calm, unmindful. And Toka, too, knew she and he would have to depend on their wits alone.

Toka estimated his opponents. Kola would be tremendously strong with constant gorging on berries. By himself, Kola was not overly smart, except for his amazing genius at masonry artistry and construction. Kagi was not near, would not likely be an immediate obstacle, and there was that something that had come between Kagi and Kola. But Rissa, lounging there so openly, was the one to watch, to match wits with.

Toka eyed Roya again. Her manner of unconcern seemed at last to have puzzled the licentious Kola, for the lounging giant frowned slightly, grunted, turned his opaque blue eyes to Toka, looked him up and down.

"Well," he mocked, "how's it feel to be back again?"

"Place seems to need a little cleanning," replied Toka easily.

"Well," rasped Kola, seeming to miss the point, "that's what you're back for—among other things."

"Then you'll need only me?"

"Oh, but I need someone else too! But you're all the Princess Rissa needs!" He turned humorously to Rissa. "Eh, Princess?"

Rissa's dark eyes only glowed the more on Toka. He shifted slightly under them. Rissa's lips curled faintly in anticipation.

"He may do," she observed. "I'll have to see." She mocked Roya with a glance.

Roya quietly observed in cutting amusement, "Some are sure hard up for it."

Rissa's color mounted, her eyes burned black hate. Kola mouthed berries and watched in amusement. Toka could only be apprehensive. He shot Roya a warning glance. But Roya suddenly turned away from Kola and Rissa and, head up, leisurely strolled out through the foyer.

TOKA caught his breath, watched Kola and Rissa. They were shocked, gaping. Toka, tense, ready to leap, even if only in vain, could have laughed out loud. Roya's very audacity had left the royal two completely dumbfounded. No one had ever before so completely ignored the authority of Kola, the high position of his sister.

Rissa recovered first, leaped to her feet, was trembling in rage. Her dark eyes blazed across the table at Kola, lolling there and smiling back at her so unconcernedly.

"Well, what are you lying there for? Go and stop her!"

But Kola seemed now only greatly struck by the sporting zest of Roya's manner. "Let her go!" he waved in high spirit. "Let her go! She'll be back! Besides," mocking Toka, "we have your new slave to break in."

Rissa remembered, stood eyeing Toka in intense anticipation.

Toka knew he couldn't get away with Roya's trick; he was still amazed at Roya's success with it. And to give her time to get away, he'd have to detain these two, jolt their minds. The clamor of the Big Snakes still vibrated Sandcliff, still kept rising in volume. Only the remarkable filter ability of hearing enabled Toka and the other Sandcliffians to converse and hear so easily.

"Figured any way to clear away the Big Snakes?" asked Toka of Kola. Again Kola and Rissa were taken unawares. They eyed him sharply. Toka knew he had struck close.

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"Any business of yours?" sneered Kola.

"Why," easily explained Toka, "I imagine everyone in Sandcliff is wondering about it."

"Well, let them keep on wondering!" roared Kola.

"My brave Toka has a plan?" asked Rissa.

"Why—why, no," replied Toka, smiling. "But," he eagerly offered, "I might be able to help think of a plan."

"You're not up here to think!" roared Kola, rising irately from his lounge.

"Now, Great Kola," soothed Rissa, going to Kola and placing a restraining hand on the impatient arm. "He was only trying to help us! Weren't you, Toka?" She smiled to him.

"Sure," responded Toka. "I just don't want to see anyone get hurt."

"Be careful you don't get hurt!" sneered Kola.

"Yes, Great Kola," replied Toka humbly.

Kola stood eyeing Toka a moment. Kola was a full head above Toka, was a perfectly muscled giant. Toka gazed back expectantly, with what he hoped was the manner of the humble, eager servant.

"Twenty-five," softly warned Kola, "is always ready for trouble. I wouldn't try anything." He swung his wicked ax warningly.

"I'm sure you wouldn't, Great Kola," replied Toka, acting faintly puzzled.

"You know what I mean!" roared Kola.

"But I'm afraid I don't," protested Toka. If Roya were to be stopped on Twenty-five and brought back, it surely would have happened before now. And the other men of Twenty-five would not dare risk Kola's wrath by taking Roya anywhere but back to One on Twenty-five—if they thought she was escaping.

"And," continued Kola, "I wouldn't try walking out of here."

"I'm sure you wouldn't, Great Kola," replied Toka, with a taunting note of sarcasm.

Toka knew he had succeeded. He saw Kola's face twist in rage, his fist flashing, Rissa moving interceptingly. Toka let himself relax and go with the blow. It hurt, but he struck the floor uninjured. He feigned unconsciousness and, as if in natural reflex, rolled clear of any immediate kick. He heard Rissa vehement at her brother.

"Stop it, Kola! Stop it! That's enough!"

"He's too smart!" roared Kola. "Like the rest of them! They need somebody to beat it out of them! Out of my way!"

Toka heard them struggling fiercely, silently, their breath quick, laboring in anger. Toka lay still, carrying on his act, ready for the cracking kick of Kola's stone toecaps. He heard Kola give a sudden exclamation of pain, then heard him mouth a string of curses. The struggle had ceased. He could hear Rissa's panting.

"Don't you touch him again!" she warned Kola. "He's mine!"

Kola grunted in elaborate disgust. "A pet rat! But one move," he warned, "before I'm ready. . . ."

"I can handle him," replied Rissa confidently. "Don't worry."

Toka heard Kola again grunt his disgust, turn and stride off down the corridor leading to the other rooms.

Toka groaned slightly, stirred, fluttered his eyes open, looked up and

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around as if in a daze. Rissa stood gracefully relaxed above him, looking down at him. Her expression was one of amusement, along with possession.

"All right, sleeper," she mocked, her voice a rippling brook. "He's gone. You can get up now."

CHAPTER XXIV

TOKA carried his act through. He retained his dazed manner, struggled to a sitting position, shook his head clearingly, rubbed his jaw wincingly, ran a quick hand through his long hair, then sighed wearily and laboriously got to his feet.

Rissa's dark eyes were shrewd dancing devils now. Toka hoped his own eyes were blank. Looking casually away he noted a small berry lying apparently unnoticed on the great center table. He sauntered to the table, carefully picked up the berry, reflectively ate it, aware that Rissa was still amused. She strolled to his side and kept looking up into his face. Her mocking eyes were not quite on a level with his.

"Who do you think you're fooling, Toka?" she teased.

Toka looked at her in surprise. "Fooling?"

"Oh, Toka!" tinkled Rissa. "You precious! Don't you think I know when Kola knocks a man out?"

"It's not too hard to knock a man out," pointed out Toka, "when that man has been weakened by hunger."

Rissa smiled shrewdly. "And when did my Toka eat last?"

"Just now," he replied. "One small berry."

"No berries," smiled Rissa, "this noon, down by the Hop?"

Toka kept his manner under Rissa's shrewd eye. "Seems like there aren't any more berries to be had."

"Perhaps," suggested Rissa, "there are a few to be had—for some."

To Toka's questioning lift of an eyebrow, Rissa turned her perfect back and strolled toward the doorway to the side terrace.

"Come, my Toka," she said softly. Her smile and eyes over her shoulder were insinuating, devilish.

Toka had long wanted to examine that terrace. He obediently followed.

"Close the doors, my Toka," ordered Rissa.

Toka carefully pulled the stone doors to. They didn't catch, had no latch or lock, apparently. Toka then turned and looked about the secluded retreat. The sun had just set, and the first faint purpling light of cool twilight was making the nook even more seductive. Toka's glance at the sky detected no sign of storm. He strolled about, his gaze idle and casual. Rissa had langorously reclined into one of the two lounges facing one another midway beside the broad balustrade. She smiled invitingly up to Toka.

"Won't you sit down, my Toka?" She patted an intimate place on the lounge.

Toka grinned, sauntered on about the terrace. He was not too familiar with it; it had scarcely been completed when Kola and the wily Kagi had engineered their coup. Too, as merely human, he had to admire the way Rissa was using her surroundings to advantage. But he thought of Roya, of her different, more desirable beauty, and was strengthened.

ROYA must have escaped back to Old Walloo. Toka mentally chortled. The very audacity of her move had caused it to succeed—but for how long? Kola, too, well knew Roya could not for long escape. Toka was again grim of mind.

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"Toka," came a softly inviting reminder from the occupied lounge, "is under orders to Princess Rissa."

Toka sauntered back to Rissa's lounge and stood in the space between the two lounges, a space that was just scarcely larger than one of the large stones of the flooring. It was a spot, Toka noted, midway alongside the balustrade, a perfectly natural spot for a person to absently stroll onto and stand and view the brutally beautiful landscape, that was now lightly purpling in the gathering twilight.

"Sit down, my Toka," invited Rissa again. "Here." She shifted a little way aside at her hips.

Toka only grinned, turned and swept his glance around the terrace again.

"The palms and flowers were my idea," offered Rissa. "Like it?"

Toka nodded, turned, leaned over the balustrade and looked down to the spongy clearing far below, where the valley's jungle thinned up to meet the brow of barren red hills marching away into the slowly darkening west. The clearing seemed scarcely larger than the palm of his hand, yet three Big Snakes were moving uncrowdedly about down there in it. The huge reptiles were seeking a possible ascent to Sandcliff. They kept nosing testingly about the base of the sheer wall. Occasionally they looked up, opened their great maws. But their roars were mingled with the hundreds from the throats of those still vainly assaulting the front of Sandcliff.

A half smile of grimness on his face, Toka turned back to the terrace. His searching eye lit on a sizable palm, set in a red clay tub of earth a pace in diameter. Aware that Rissa was now watching him with a faintly amused but sharp air, he stepped to the palm, tilted its tub, and thus rolled it into the space between the two lounges.

"The Great Kola," remarked Rissa, "won't like anything put there."

Shooting her a carefully enigmatic grin, Toka bent, heaved the palm, tub and all, out over the balustrade. Rissa was instantly beside him and also leaning over and watching. The palm was fast shrinking to a speck as it plummeted, tub first.

One of the Big Snakes suddenly looked up, saw the plummeting object and began circling to try to catch it. But the Big Snake misjudged and, as Toka watched tense, the palm and its tub struck in the clear and bounced high over the huge reptile, struck and bounced high again. But this time one of the other Big Snakes, a great hornbilled monster, caught it before it lit again. The huge hornbill whirled away in triumph, raced away for the playing field, was followed by the two other Big Snakes. As Toka leaned farther out to see better, the Big Snakes frontally attacking Sandcliff abruptly whirled away and streamed off after the great hornbill. The thundering of the monster's going decreasingly trembled Sandcliff, but the sudden ceasing of the attacks left a startling chasm of comparative silence.

TOKA'S eyes returned toward the diamond, stopped in surprise. The dead Big Snake was not there! Toka was puzzled. The hulk hadn't been buried; the continuous attacks on Sandcliff eliminated that possibility. Had the monster somehow recovered? Toka straightened back, thoughtful, hopeful. He would be glad if Rok and he had not killed the Big Snake; it might make things easier.

Anyway, before complete darkness that game would be resumed—without a human as ball. The Big Snake danger to Sandcliff had been relieved, temporarily—and temporarily only, for the

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wrathful Kola would no doubt promptly reinstate that danger for a continuation of his unholy ends. The reinstatement of that danger would present an opportunity to test a theory.

But had a theory been proved as to how the Big Snakes had been induced to use humans for play: the Great Tokay had somehow been thrown from the terrace while several Big Snakes had been innocently grazing that spongy clearing down there. The Big Snakes, seeing a human bounce so remarkably, had instantly conceived the idea of using them for play. And so the terrible scourge had been started.

But Toka was again puzzled. A piece was still missing from the picture: how could the Great Tokay, a powerfully muscled and alert man, ever have been physically overcome, even by the giant Kola?

CHAPTER XXV

THE surf of sounds of the Big Snakes resuming their game came almost peacefully now. And Toka was suddenly aware of Rissa's eyes searching his face. He turned what he hoped were innocently puzzled eyes down on her. Through the gathering twilight he saw Rissa was queerly pale of complexion; drawn of face. Her hand at her throat, she leaned against the balustrade as if for support. She eyed him almost in apprehension, Toka thought. He grinned disarmingly.

"Rather interesting, wasn't it?"

Rissa had an automatic smile for him. "Yes—wasn't it?"

Toka acted resigned. "But they'll be back again."

Rissa was noncommittal. "Yes?"

"Queer things, those Big Snakes," observed Toka. "Doesn't take much to give them an idea—sometimes."

Rissa had turned away and was lying herself back into her lounge. Toka stood speculating as to just how much she knew, how much she could tell him, how to make her tell—especially about Kola's vault. He remembered Rissa was a woman passionately wanting his affection. He smiled down at her. She responded. Her eyes came aglow. She shifted aside at her hips. He accepted, sat down. He looked around the little terrace, let out an appreciative breath.

"You've made it very nice up here, Princess," he said.

"Rissa," she invited, "—to you."

Toka laughed intimately. "Okay, Rissa. And you've still made it very nice up here."

"But something was always missing," coquetted Rissa.

Toka frowned in feigned bewilderment. "I don't see what it could be!"

"You."

As they softly laughed in mutual flattery, Rissa reached her hand up around Toka's neck and slowly pulled him down to her. He did not resist, but with a smile easily avoided her readied lips. He brushed a quick kiss onto her cheek instead, then drew away. With a glad little cry, Rissa was instantly after him, locked her arms possessively around his neck and pressed her body to his. He let an arm steal around her waist.

"Toka," breathed Rissa. "Kiss me."

"What'll you give me?" he parried.

"A kiss," bargained Rissa, "for a kiss."

Toka winked slyly, grinned impishly. "Nope." He rolled his head away from Rissa's hungry mouth.

Rissa was happily determined now. She strained Toka's head toward her. But her lips succeeded only in brushing his cheek as he adroitly gave and buried his face a moment in her scented hair, then twisted out of her lip reach.

"Raise your bid!" he taunted.

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"To what?" gasped Rissa, clinging close.

"Oh, not so very much," parried Toka.

RISSA was aglow and alive, strong with aroused desires. But Toka was stronger only with cool, calculating strategy, with a steady vision of Roya. He again managed to avoid Rissa's lips.

"Anything you want," offered Rissa.

"Anything?" whispered Toka.

"Anything," breathed Rissa.

Her eyes burned bright, her breath came from her half parted lips warm, fast, deep. Her whole flower scenting was intoxicatingly close in Toka's sensitive nostrils. The steadying vision of Roya began to dim slightly.

"Anything," offered Rissa. Her arms tightened convulsively. She pressed close again.

Toka rolled his head again. "Berries too?" he parried with a low intimate laugh in his throat.

"Everything." Rissa had forgotten her position of authority, her role as mistress. She was now only a woman passionately primitive.

Toka knew the vault could be nowhere but in Kola's room; the man would trust it to no one else. Toka again let his lips brush Rissa's cheek. "What's the vault's combination?"

"Both the goat's ey—" Rissa caught her tongue. Her face flowed with expressions.

Toka knew he had gotten as far with this as he could. Rissa's eyes burned hate now. Her lips curled vengeance. She jerked free. One hand flashed to the waistband of her cobalt-blue shorts. As Toka leaped clear, and Rissa after him and between him and the doors, he saw a flat narrow black dagger flash in her hand.

Toka backed away toward the north end of the nook, and Rissa apparently believed she had him trapped. Her teeth flashed in a grin of impending triumph. Narrow-eyed, Toka backed away. Rissa slowly advanced, a hotly enraged mixture of aroused and thwarted passions, beautiful woman who had been tricked.

"Easy, Princess," warned Toka, "or I'll have to spring the trap of this place." His searching words found no mark; in the twilight, he saw Rissa pause, look at him a moment in only unfeigned blankness. If one of Kola's clever traps was here, she apparently knew nothing of it. Her face showed this to be true.

Another momentary advantage gained by that searching remark was not wasted by Toka. He flashed his hard calloused foot, kicked the wrist of Rissa's knife hand. She gave a little cry of anguish as the knife glittered away over the balustrade and disappeared. Then she threw herself upon him, was a kicking, biting and hysterically wild thing, choking and sobbing out incoherent words of bitter disappointment. Toka was hard put to hold her off. After many minutes, he finally spun her around, leaped for the doors, and burst through them just as a potted flower crashed overhead into the gargoyles.

Every sense alert, Toka heard the immediately following quick double click and then he caught Rissa's surprised gasp.

But Toka was stealing swiftly down the glowing corridor leading to the other rooms. He was also aware that the Big Snakes had ceased their game again in a grumble of disappointment. The huge reptiles would be returning to the valley to graze through the jungles for an hour, then bed down in a growth of fern trees or similar cushioning vegetation till daybreak. Kola would then have to make his move over again.

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CHAPTER XXVI

AT THE door to Kola's room now, Toka could detect no one within. His sensitive hands quickly found the releasing masonry. A soft stony click, and the door was swinging silently in. Toka slipped in, the door shut itself. Toka's eyes covered the room, took in every detail. Through the dusk of the room his eyes settled upon the north wall, upon the large inlay design of a goat.

Toka stepped over, reached out both hands and pressed the goat's both eyes at once. Half the wall swung out. Toka paused a moment, then stepped into the cavernous vault. As he picked up a full pack and opened a corner and spilled out a dozen berries, he estimated Kola's complete stock of them. About ten thousand packs, approximately Toka's previous estimation by deduction. As he sealed the pack, he quickly estimated the other wealth, was not amazed at its volume.

Still chewing, Toka stepped out, tried to swing the half of wall back. It stood immovable into the room. Toka stopped chewing in thought. There was a closing mechanism also. Toka stepped to the fore half of the goat on the solid half of the wall. His swift hands eventually found the left forehoof of the goat, pressed. The swung-out half of the wall sighed shut as Toka swallowed well-masticated berries.

It was dark now, only the dim light from the low western stars came under the side terrace awning and through the high windows of Kola's room. The whole apartment, except for its rooms with walls and ceilings that glowed, would be dark till the late full moon rose had swung down toward setting.

Toka opened Kola's door, stole through, let it shut, then was stealing up the glowing corridor. He paused before entering the main room. Its scened walls and ceiling glowed softly. The candles had not been lighted, as was now the wasteful custom of those on Twenty-five when using even such a room. A woman's soft crying was coming from the side terrace, the doors of which were ajar.

Toka slipped swiftly across the huge main room and into the foyer, peered out onto terrace Twenty-five. He could see no one about. The elevator operators were not on duty after dark. Toka stepped to the balustrade of Kola's projecting terrace, paused a moment. The patrols on duty, whose conversing drifted up as soft drones, would be lazing in their offices in the centers of the terraces below Twenty-four. From Twenty-four could be heard only the two drummers, lounging beside the drum.

TOKA swung over the balustrade and dropped softly to Twenty-four. He quickly repeated the move to Twenty-three, and on down, all the way to Sixteen. There, he slipped to Old Lito's apartment, stole into the foyer. He could hear Old Lito's painful, labored breathing, hear another natural shallower breathing.

Toka whispered, "Little Lito."

"What do you want now!" came Little Lito's brave challenge.

"It's Toka!" hissed Toka.

"Toka!" gasped Little Lito.

Toka was into the dark main room, carefully reaching out his empty hand. He found a thin youthful form. The lad promptly clutched his hand.

"Old Lito," asked Toka anxiously; "how is he?" He heard the lad swallow with effort.

"N-not so good."

"Little Lito," said Toka. He held the lad's wasted hand solemnly.

"Yes?"

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"I've got a pack of Kola's berries here."

"Berries!" gasped Little Lito. "Kola's!"

"Shhhhhh!" warned Toka. "Here." He placed the pack into the lad's thin, outstretched hands. "Take this. You know how to open and seal it. Feed Old Lito twenty of them. Take five yourself. Then—"

"Yes?" eagerly responded Little Lito to Toka's sober tone.

"Sneak the rest down to Old Walloo. Tell him where I got them. Tell him to divide what he and Roya don't need and have you sneak it to those in greatest need.

"Yes, Toka."

"And tell him this," went on Toka in a tone to press home the importance. "The north wall. Both the goat's eyes at the same time. Repeat these instructions to me now."

"The north wall. Both the goat's eyes at the same time."

"Good. See you again." Toka was silently away, back onto terrace Sixteen.

He slipped to the west stairway, up again toward Twenty-five. Except for the patrols talking low on the centers, the terraces below Twenty-one, like Twenty-one and those above, were apparently still deserted. Even the patrols and warriors were not keen about venturing too much about till moonrise. That would be late, tonight.

Toka reached Twenty-five apparently unnoticed. He slipped back to apartment One and into the foyer. He paused a moment. The main room was still empty. There was no sound of weeping coming from the side terrace. In the whole apartment not a sound could be detected. After the day-long roaring attack of the Big Snakes, the complete silence seemed acutely unnatural.

CHAPTER XXVII

SHORTLY after Kagi's visit to the Red Eye and Broken Nose, it had been time for Scar Face and his three fellow underlings of the collection office to be relieved by four others, who took over the next shift of work. But Scar Face had remained, lounging around the terrace, apparently fascinated by the mass of Big Snakes veinly attacking. Though Scar Face chatted with the next shift he was inconspicuously never beyond earshot of Red Eye and Broken Nose.

Red Eye and Broken Nose were standing silent, a short distance away, beside the balustrade, apparently also fascinated by the Big Snakes.

"Well," observed Scar Face, "guess it's no use hangin' around any longer."

Red Eye and Broken Nose did not reply.

"Nope," went on Scar Face, "those five tailers sure ain't comin' back through them things down there."

Red Eye and Broken Nose only grunted.

"Well, see you in the morning, Chiefs!" called the Scar Face.

Only more grunts from Red Eye and Broken Nose.

Scar Face sauntered to the east stairway, started up to his barrack apartment, occupied by himself and three others on Twenty-three. He ascended leisurely, in a manner of a man without any immediate objective or appointment. On the way he paused on several terraces, talked idly of the Big Snakes. His acquaintances were the patrols, and more than views regarding the Big Snakes were adroitly elicited by Scar Face. He finally reached terrace Twenty-three, let his eyes wander up along the balustrade of Twenty-four. Only the two drummers, down near the center, beside the

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huge drum were leaning on the balustrade, watching. Scar Face waved casually. The drummers nodded in return.

Scar Face stopped beside the balustrade of Twenty-three in front of his apartment near the east stairway. He looked over just as the Big Snakes suddenly ceased their attacks and whirled away after a great hornbill that was triumphantly carrying a potted palm in its mouth. As all Sandcliff knew only on Kola's side terrace were there potted palms. Scar Face watched in obvious puzzlement as the Big Snakes streamed back to their playing field.

Scar Face turned again, let his eyes go along the balustrade of Twenty-four. Only the two drummers, still down there beside the huge drum. They, too, seemed puzzled by the Big Snakes. There were only the drummers; Scar Face made sure without being obvious. Of course, Twenty-four was patrolled only when the court was in action or the workshop was in use; other times, except for Sandcliffians passing up or down, only the two drummers.

SCAR FACE was about to turn back to the Big Snakes when just overhead appeared the hairless head and huge shoulders of Kola. The great one's face was a scowling thundercloud, ready to javelin out destroying lightning. Then Kola saw Scar Face, jerked an arm in command. Scar Face promptly ran up the east stairway to Twenty-four. So far as could be seen, there was no one on Twenty-five.

Scar Face strode quickly close to Kola's side, breathed, "News," then so any eavesdropper could easily hear, "Yes, Great Kola?"

Without taking his eyes from the Big Snakes, Kola angrily rasped, "See how it happened?" then breathed, "What about?"

"No, Great Kola," replied Scar Face. "I was not watching your terrace," then he breathed, "Kagi."

Kola grunted, breathed, "See me later."

Scar Face and Kola stood watching the Big Snakes. The spectators had resumed their places on the hills surrounding the field and were thumping their tails and roaring encouragement to their favorites. The Yellow Legs had run out onto the field. The Blue Backs' great slugger, The King, stepped into the batter's box as the Legs' catcher to end the short warm-up, easily returned the potted palm to The Prince.

"Crazy things," rasped Kola.

"Yes, Great Kola," replied Scar Face.

"Shut up and watch!"

"Yes, Great Kola."

"Shut up!"

Scar Face stood silent beside Kola. The King grinned and wagged his great tail threateningly. The Backs' three base runners were hooting and taking short dancing leads. The Prince sneered at The King as coolly as though the bases were not loaded with the Backs' fastest runners, as though the count on the terrible King was not three and two, as though this was not the last half of the ninth inning, the score not thirty to twenty-seven in favor of the Legs, with two Blue Backs already away, one pitch needed to win—or lose.

In the gathering purple of the twilight, The Prince leaned over for his sign, got it, straightened up. The King swung his mighty tail back, tensed, ready, waiting. The Prince slowly wound, rared back, came down and whipped the potted palm. The King was swinging from the heels and

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the cheering starting. "Crack!" and in the deep purple light a great tail met the streaking shadow that was the palm and its tub. But a gasp of Big Snake anguish went up as the clay tub split, fell away, as dirt from the tub trailed in the air behind the palm and its naked roots as it whistled foul.

Kola muttered a curse. Night had fallen, starlighted, and the great cliff on the other side of the valley was a glowing white mass of spires. Amid grumbles of disgust over that strange new ball's performance, the game was called. The mass of Big Snakes broke up into small parties and started up over the hills to the valley, to graze up and down it an hour or so before bedding down till dawn and a resumption of the game.

Kola turned away from the balustrade of Twenty-four, commanded, "Come on, Scar Face, and help me with a little job in here."

"Yes, Great Kola!" eagerly replied Scar Face, and followed Kola into the court.

THE walls and ceiling of the huge court gave off the light of soft day. Scar Face followed Kola down an aisle, up and across the dais, through the doorway back of Kola's throne, into a small room with a black door. The east wall of the room was taken up by a huge red clay urn, which was the lottery urn, and six slightly smaller urns containing unused lottery slips. Several sticks of chalk lay atop the slips. Kola stood with his back to a black stone door that apparently opened straight back into the cliff. Scar Face stood to one side of the draped doorway. His manner had abruptly changed upon entering the room. He was no longer servile, no longer unintelligent of tongue.

"Anybody out there?" rasped Kola. "Any snoopers?"

Scar Face turned, parted the blue draperies a crack. "No one."

"Well," smirked Kola, "let's have it."

Scar Face reported the incident between Red Eye, Broken Nose and Toka regarding the Big Snake tail. Kola growled. But Scar Face deleted reference to Toka using his, Scar Face's, battle-ax to halve the tail.

"Kagi saw Red Eye and Broken Nose again today, as you probably know," continued Scar Face. "They wanted to be alone again, in the office."

"Well?"

"Kola's ear was outside, next the doorway." Scar Face joined Kola's smile.

"And?" prodded Kola.

"Your trusted right hand announced there is to be a lottery."

"So?"

"The Great Kola is supposed to believe the winner will be one Toka."

Kola chuckled coarsely.

"The trusted right hand," went on Scar Face, "and the beautiful pair of collectors think otherwise."

"And just who is to be the winner?" asked Kola.

"That they did not say, though they seemed to have an understanding between themselves about it."

Kola smiled thinly. "I can guess their winner."

"Yes?" asked Scar Face.

"Go on!" rasped Kola. "How about the rest of it?"

"Of course you know your spies sent to tail the hunters will never return?"

"Yes, yes! A handful of fools! Get on with the other!"

"They, Red Eye and Broken Nose, informed the trusted right hand that half were sure, that the rest would follow when the time came."

Kola roared with laughter, then re-

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membered and quieted. "And the time?"

"At the lottery, tomorrow."

Kola's opaque blue eyes glinted gory, his lips curled. He fingered his knife hilt thoughtfully. "The list of names?"

"I haven't been able to search the office yet," replied Scar Face.

"Get that list, first chance. There will be food for many lotteries on it."

Scar Face nodded, then as Kola only smiled and fingered his knife hilt, he observed in puzzlement, "But the Big Snakes have ceased their desirable attacks. There will still be need for a lottery?"

"The Big Snakes'll be back!" snarled Kola. He gave a short laugh. "There'll be a lottery—at least a lottery." His lips curled in savor to the last phrase.

"My assistance with your little job has been sufficient for this evening?" asked Scar Face.

"Yeah. You'll get your ten packs of berries when this thing is cleaned up."

"Right, Chief!" whispered Scar Face. He resumed his former servile air and strolled out the draped doorway.

CHAPTER XXVIII

TOKA stole to the doorway to the side terrace. By the faint light of the stars, he saw the terrace was now unoccupied. He turned, stole swiftly across to the glowing corridor. He paused warily, then began stealing down it. The door to the first room was ajar. He paused at it, listened. Not a sound. The door to the next room, Rissa's, was closed. He paused at it, listened. A soft stirring. Rissa seemed tossing about in bed.

Toka stole on down to the door of the third and last room, Kola's. It, too, was closed. Toka listened intently. There was a faint movement within, an unnatural movement, a stealthy sound. Toka strained his hearing. There was a soft sighing sound, then a muffled stony click. Toka knew that sound, the vault closing. Then there was the sound of stealthy footsteps, too light for Kola's, moving toward the door.

Toka quickly whirled, stole swiftly back up the corridor to the empty room beyond Rissa's. He stepped out of sight into the doorway, peered carefully back down the corridor. The door to Kola's room softly opened. Toka held his breath as Kagi, fully armed but without any loot, stepped out. Toka quickly drew back. The door to Kola's room softly closed itself. Toka waited, ready to get behind the ajar door of this empty room. But he heard Kagi open the door across the corridor, across from Kola's room. He heard Kagi step stealthily through and heard the door softly shut itself.

Toka wasted a moment, then was swiftly down the corridor again, listening intently at the door through which Kagi had stolen. There was a very faint sound of footsteps stealthily receding.

Toka found the releasing masonry, pressed. A soft click, and the door opened into a passage that ran straight ahead some six paces, then turned back into the cliff. The passage, as far as the turn, was empty.

Toka stepped in and stole silently down to the turn, peered carefully around it. The passage stretched straight back into the cliff for some twenty paces, to a second turn, to the right, east again. Toka saw Kagi, back to him, carefully peering around the second turn. A moment, and Kagi stepped around the corner.

Kagi's footsteps covering any possible sound of his own, Toka quickly

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stole down to the second corner, peered around. He again saw Kagi, some twenty paces distant, back to him, his ear to a stone door that closed the passage. Kagi reached up, pressed a block of the masonry. The door opened and Kagi stepped on into a continuation of the passage. The door shut behind him.

Toka waited a moment, then was swiftly down to the door, was listening intently. Kagi's footsteps were stealing down stone steps now. They reached bottom, paused, then continued along and abruptly faded.

TOKA pressed the releasing masonry. The door swung open. The passage continued for some ten paces before dropping into a stairway. The space immediately ahead to the stairway was clear, but Toka hesitated. Already one door had closed behind him before he could find the release block of masonry for getting back.

Toka's mind meshed on the problem. These doors, too, were likely closed by stepping on a flooring stone. Toka backed, took two running steps, leaped, landed silently. The door stayed open behind him.

Toka moved silently on to the head of the stairs. They and the stretch of passage visible on from them were empty. Toka slowly descended. The passage stretched away empty, doorless for some fifty paces to a dead end. Toka paused. He knew the court was now on the other side of the right wall of this passage. The passage must surely lead on to that room with the draped doorway behind Kola's throne. But where had Kagi vanished?

Toka experienced an uneasy moment. He glanced warily back up the stairs. He could not see the doorway through which he had leaped; the stretch of passage beyond the top of the stairs blocked a view. Toka strained his hearing. Only his own breathing, the steady beating of his own heart.

He slipped swiftly on down the passage, his eyes covering the walls for any telltale cracking for a door. He came up against the dead end, examined it closely. There, too, the squares of white stone fitted without a crack. Toka pressed his ear against the dead end. Still only his own breathing, his own heart. He ran his sensitive hands over the dead end, the walls nearby. Nothing. Again Toka became uneasy. He glanced keenly back up the passage, listened. Nothing. He was about to run his hands over the stones again when his ears picked up Kagi's hurrying footsteps approaching on the other side of the dead end.

Toka ran noiselessly back along the passage, bounded up the stairs, turned on the top and dropped flat to watch. The whole dead end was swinging in, then Kagi squeezed hurriedly through, stooped, pressed a square of the flooring and the dead end swung shut.

Toka was up, whirled silently back along the passage. The open door behind him closed itself softly. Toka ran swiftly back along the passage to the door opposite Kola's room. Toka ran his hands swiftly in search, failed to find the releasing mechanism. He could hear Kagi's sandaled feet growing closer. Toka tried the door. It was solid. Desperately he ran his hands again in search.

Toka knew he couldn't have found the releasing masonry, nothing had given in the slightest. Yet there was the soft stony click, and the door swung in toward him, to reveal the equally startled Rissa.

CHAPTER XXIX

TOKA stepped swiftly into the corridor, and the door swung to behind

(Continued on page 112)

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THROUGH A DEAD MAN'S EYES

Ibn's horse was tiring. Worse still, the gap between him and his pursuers was closing

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What was the connection between this grinning skull and a handful of damp leaves and moist earth?

By GEOFF ST. REYNARD

DOCTOR JOHN ALEX collected skulls. It was not merely a hobby, like stamps and Scotch labels, but his life-work, his vocation and avocation, his meat and drink and his soul and life. Doctor John called himself a specialized craniological archaeologist (but that was pure swank), and had labored his way through ten years of complicated classes in the better universities; so now he was Head of the Department of Archaeology and Assistant Head of Palaeontology at Oxor Museum. But he still stayed, at heart, a skull-collector.

Teddy O'Shantos had an adequate income of his own and was lucky to have it. Teddy was a damned fool. He played with things that were and always will be too serious for better men than he. If Teddy had ever had to work just once in his life this story might not have happened.

Randolph George Foxe was twenty-seven and red-haired. He owned two stone houses and two Irish Setters and a portable typewriter and a small—a very small—bank account. If he had saved rejection slips he would have owned two hundred and six. He was in love with a girl, who has nothing to do with this story; and by renting one of said houses to Teddy O'Shantos, he managed to feed himself and his Irish Setters, and to buy stamps and twenty-pound bond paper. In a way he was handsome, except for his big ears.

If Ran Foxe had written this tale, he would most likely have begun it on a December night, a night of keening wind and mourning owls; a soul-chilling midnight that dripped evil. Seated by his comfortable fire, his setters at his feet, a volume of ancient lore in his hand, there would come to him one Theodore O'Shantos, panting and eager, yet deathly afraid of a Something that dogged his very heels. . . .

IT ACTUALLY begins one stifling August afternoon. Ran Foxe is bathing his setters in a tub in the back yard; he is thinking: Lord, I'll need a bath myself after this, it's so infernally hot. Enter, from Ran's back door, Teddy O'Shantos, yawning. Teddy has a snub nose over a revolting little moustache. His hair is burnished teakwood.

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"Oowygau," said Teddy, stretching his arms up and watching Ladygirl squirm out of Ran's soapy clutch, "come to pay th' rent."

"Thanks," grunted Ran. He was no very ardent admirer of Mr. O'Shantos. "How's the sorcery coming? Any ghouls yet? Any gnomes today, lady?"

"Laugh, you hyena," grinned Teddy amiably. "I've got something on tap this time that'll pin your ears up. Something, by th' way, you oughta make a story out of. Something different."

"What?" asked Ran absently, upsetting Oberon neatly into the tub and sitting on him. "A guileful genie, a baleful banshee, a lousy leprechaun, a whimsical werewolf, a—"

"It's new, I tell you, you thus and so," interrupted Teddy profanely. "I'll bet half a month's rent you never heard of anything like it."

"Well, what is it?" Oberon got soap in his eye and screeched indignantly. Ran Foxe splashed water at him.

"It's a necromask."

"Is it now?"

"You make it out of a skull."

"No I don't."

"I mean it's made out of a skull."

"Uh."

"You take th' front half of a skull and cover it with velvet, and you make a Faust pentagram with d—"

"With dillers and dollars and ten-o'clock scholars," chanted Ran. "Teddy, why don't you go to work?"

Teddy was horrified. "Why the devil?"

"Don't you ever get tired of horrid incantations all day and Oxor barrooms all night?"

"No," said Teddy truthfully, bewildered that anyone could think so.

"Oh, well, in that case . . .," sighed Ran, setting off across the fields after the errant Ladygirl.

. . . That night Teddy did not drive his convertible into Oxor to King Arthur's Castle or The Purple Mermaid. Instead, he walked a mile and a half to the nearest cemetery, a place of dilapidated chipped stones with undecipherable inscriptions; he had a shovel over his shoulder. There is a very deep and real reason why human beings are ordinarily frightened in a graveyard after nightfall, but Teddy was too foolish to know it. He left an hour later, with the vague feeling that the authorities should air-condition the place. The heat was terrific.

RAN FOXE met Teddy outside the Oxor Museum one later day.

"How'zit, Teddy?" said Ran. Teddy was sitting in his car.

"It didn't work," mourned the young would be magician.

"What?"

"My necromask. Hop in and I'll take you home and explain it."

The thought of the long walk home was all that prompted Ran to accept. He leaned back and shut his eyes as Teddy hurtled the car away from the curb.

"I can't figure it," began Teddy. "The skull looks good, see? The dog was absolutely fresh. The velvet cost me three bucks. I read the spell backwards seven times. Still I can't see anything but my own room."

"Ahh," Ran murmured, not having heard a word.

"Say!" The idler had an inspiration. "Let's go out and see that grave now! Maybe there'll be a clue."

"Sure," grunted Ran, not having the slightest idea what Teddy had said.

The sleek automobile slid up beside the ancient cemetery. Teddy swung his long legs out.

"Come on, it's over here," said he.

"Oh, Teddy! What next?"

They stood beside a very clumsily

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refilled grave. Ran awoke.

"You thundering fool!" cried Ran Foxe. "Don't you know you can get ten or fifteen years for this? Or lynched, maybe?" He had no doubt that he gazed on Teddy's work.

Teddy paid no attention. He was crouched before the weathered headstone painfully reading it.

"Obadiah Malachi Beeker. . . .b. 1799. . . . d. 1864. . . . The Lord have mercy on his . . . soul . . . and take him to that . . . realm, must be? . . . where these blind eyes shall see. . . . *Blind!*" The rich young man jubilantly slapped Ran, who was still horrified. "The old fellow was blind! No wonder it didn't work!" He grinned like a grammar-school boy with a ten-dollar bill. "Help me, Ran; let's dig up another."

"Oh, you half-witted fool!"

The writer dragged Teddy by main force back to the car and tossed him in. All the way home he lectured on the sin of grave-robbing. Even Teddy began to realize somehow that he had committed a crime. Just a bit sobered, he asked:

"You won't say anything, Ran?"

"No, you young idiot. As long as you take the poor old fellow's head back and bury it with him, I'll keep shut. But Teddy, don't try any more of that stuff. Not for your silly experiments."

"I promise," said Teddy solemnly.

He went home and burned the old skull in his furnace. If he was ever haunted for it, or regretted the action, this story has nothing to do with it.

RAN FOXE sat on his front porch imagining an arctic wind whooshing down on him. Great drops of sweat stood on his forehead, his light clothes were soaked through. The heat was becoming more unbearable every day.

Through the afternoon heat haze Doctor John Alex struggled, came up to the porch, and sat down.

"My heavens! What weather!" wheezed Doctor John.

"Have a drink of lemonade," offered Ran, an abstainer from anything more potent.

"Thank you. You—haven't got any—er' vile brew, I suppose?" asked Doctor John wistfully. "Any grog? No, I suppose not. Well, then, a small glass, please. About six fingers." He settled himself on the step wearily.

"What hauls you through this horrid murk to my humble doorstep?" Ran had been working on a period piece and was not quite himself.

"Randolph, you're an author," stated Doctor John when he had sucked a long draught of lemonade. "You write books," he elucidated further. "You write detective stories sometimes. About the perfect crimes. Then you solve them. Don't you?"

"Well, yes, but they never get farther than the editor's door step."

"That hasn't anything to do with it. I want you to solve a mystery for me."

"But the police—" said Ran feebly.

"The Oxor police!" sneered the doctor contemptuously.

"Oh, now look—" started Ran, about to back out ungracefully. "The layman always has the wrong slant on us writers—"

Doctor John was, however, in stride.

"This morning I came into my third floor archaeology wing and discovered a case broken open and two skulls gone. I naturally had it shut off from the public, and everything is just as it was when I—"

Ran let him potter on, while he thought furiously. His mind jumped at once to the graveyard experience of last week. Teddy, the young fathead. Teddy and his diabolism.

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"I can get them back for you, I think, Doctor John," Ran broke in. "I just want you not to ask me who took them. I think I know. Is it a deal?"

"Rather an irregular one, but it's a deal!"

"Thanks," said Ran absently. Leaving the archaeologist he whistled for his dogs and went swinging down the road, dust puffing away under his heels, Ladygirl padding behind him.

A perspiring Teddy opened the door at Ran's thirteenth ring. Ran pushed in.

"Give it back, Teddy," said he quietly.

"Wh-what back?" stammered an ashen Teddy.

"The skull. Or skulls, rather."

Teddy looked actually relieved. "Oh, those! How'd you know — oh, of course. Well, I'm afraid I can't give 'em back. At least, only one of 'em. I've cut up the other." His eyes glistened. "It works! I told you it would. I'm a wizard!" He stepped back proudly.

"You jackass, I want those skulls. Would you rather have me or the police?"

Teddy cringed. Teddy whined. "I tell you, I cut it up. You can have the other—if you want it after I show you —what I have to show you. Come on upstairs."

RAN and his setter followed Teddy up the dark soft-carpeted stairs and into a dim room that was suddenly cooler than it should have been. Ladygirl did not like it. She crouched by the door and put her plumed tail down.

The room had no apparent windows; the illumination came from tall saffron candles, little crimson tongues that struggled to pierce the azure murk which lolled in the corners like a watchful animal.

"Quite an orthodox ghoul's hangout," grunted Ran. His eyes took in tubes and bottles, queer weapons, a small refrigerator, shelves of musty books. Teddy pointed to a dirty-looking prognathous skull on a table.

"There's one of 'em," said he. "Here's the other." He showed Ran a black velvet mask, like the frontal portion of a skull. It had eyes in it. It looked Halloweenish, and rather terrible.

The author took it curiously and turned it in his hands. There was a thong to hold it to the head.

"You put part of it—that other skull —in this?" he asked.

"Yes. You look through it and—" his nasal voice sank to a whisper—*"you see through a dead man's eyes!"* He struck a fantastic pose, hands outstretched.

"I looked through it and saw an Eastern harem and the court of a ruler of some kind. A sultan! It was gorgeous—colors you never dreamed of. The thing's even in Technicolor!"

"Teddy, are you crazy?"

"You try it," said Teddy solemnly. "Step into that dog's-blood pentagram and put it on. Go on, try it."

"Dog's blood? Teddy, what hell's work have you been up to now?"

Teddy paled and involuntarily glanced at the Irish Setter, Ladygirl.

"It's a chemical compound," he whimpered nervously. "Not real dog's blood, you understand."

Ran caught the look. "Where's Oberon?" he asked sharply. "I haven't seen him all day."

"How the hell would I know?" screamed Teddy.

Ran went white, took a step toward the rich man. "O'Shantos, if you did anything to that dog I'll . . ."

"Aw, Ran, don't be silly! This is only chemical stuff!"

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"All right, friend. We'll see. There goes your telephone."

Teddy stepped to the door.

"Try it, Ran," he encouraged. "You'll get the shock o' your life when that glamorous court opens up in front of you. I wonder who the devil the guy was? Maybe a prince or a Turk?" He was gone.

Ran shrugged at the closed door. He looked curiously at the jet mask of night in his hands. Then, grinning self-consciously, he stepped into the bricky-red double triangle on the floor and adjusted the visor to his face. One of the tall golden candles crashed to the floor and sizzled out in its own grease, unheeded. Ladygirl shifted uneasily.

RAN FOXE looked through the dead man's eyes.

He expected nothing but the room itself, evil azure murk in the corners, Ladygirl beside the door, candles making eerie shadows and lights on the bare walls.

The tiny little uncivilized part of his brain anticipated an Eastern potentate seated at his ease amid throngs of beautiful slave girls.

Ran Foxe looked out on a limitless grey plain, soaking and steaming under the everlasting drizzle of an autumn day.

He jumped in astonishment.

Ladygirl suddenly howled mournfully. "Quiet, girl," said Ran through the grisly skull-thing.

The scene he peered at through the eyeholes was after the initial wonder of it, uninteresting. He experimentally turned his head to the right. The vista changed too, but far away and to the limit of sight the same grey prairie stretched drably. To the left now; the same.

Gradually he realized that the horizon was leaping up and sinking back in convulsive beats, as though trying to wake from a nightmare. He must be on a cantering horse.

He twisted in the saddle—he was beginning to feel the saddle, oddly, and the rain—and scanned the terrain behind him. Hills? Or perhaps clouds? And . . . he shuddered with a sudden sense of pursuit. So distant as to be nebulous, he perceived a long column of mounted men.

Hamdullillah! The dogs drew close.

Holy cats! What was that mouth-filling word? He straightened and frowned in perplexity. Certainly, he'd never heard it before.

Or had he? In Arabia?

Arabia! He must be going crazy. He'd never been out of three states! He'd never been near Arabia!

Or had he?

Wasn't it true that he had just come from Arabia, fleeing the paternal—and somewhat unjust — wrath of old Ibn ben Usuf Fetata?

"The doddering, hoary, senile, silly old fool! He'd have been properly comforted by the gift of a triple handful of golden *medjidies*, had I had half a chance to explain about his son. . . ."

He twisted and looked back again. The drizzling dismal rain cut off sight of his pursuers now.

Stay a moment! Wasn't there something he'd forgotten? Wasn't there a red dog, and a simple young man, and a . . . a . . . a veil, was it?

The last vestiges of Ran Foxe's ego misted off the consciousness of the Dead Man.

THE chase had been too long; he wearied of it. At the start he'd found it exhilarating sport to dodge pursuit and play at hound-and-hare with Ibn ben Usuf Fetata, avenging father of Yusuf Ali whom he'd killed in

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a street brawl. (Thumb on the blade and strike upward—and curse his too-ready knife hand!) Then the old man and his warriors had begun slowly to diminish the gap between themselves and their quarry. At the shores of Spain a month before they'd been close, too close. Now they were nearer yet.

He lifted his horse into a gallop and fled on through the dreary autumn drizzle. Water ran in turgid rivulets through the drenched grey soil, and the sound it made was a grey sound. Gaunt brown birds flapped dismally overhead, cutting the dull thick atmosphere. The earth lay sick and sad beneath him.

The big white stallion between his powerful satin-clad legs showed no outward signs of weakness, though he'd ridden it hard all day. *Inshallah,* this was a horse for a man! What luck, his coming upon it tethered in front of that inn; just when he was at the last scrap of his strength.

Ride hard, Dead Man, ride fast and hard. Gallop through the gloom and the sadness of autumn. Gallop to your destiny. Your c h e e r l e s s, somber destiny.

Four hours more of riding. No horse in the world can stand this pace, Dead Man. Not even a big white stallion. Not even this white stallion, Dead Man, with destiny on your track. Not in the eternal dismal rainfall of an autumn twilight.

He alternated between a loping canter and the terrible pace of the gallop. He kept the distance between himself and Iben ben Usuf Fetata as great as it had been—by somebody's beard! Were they a little closer? The Dead Man looked at his own courageous mount. Were they riding *afreets* back there?

Twilight deepened, and the Dead Man lost sight of the pursuit.

Jolting, rain-soaked hours of dreariness. The monotonous plain changed to rocky, hilly ground, then to scrub bushes, bedraggled under the constant downpour. A forest slowly took form ahead.

The Dead Man stared at the melancholy, half-apologetic ears of his death-weary stallion, and he felt gingerly of his great broadsword's razor edge. The forest gained, he could stand off a good many of them, or perhaps lose them altogether.

Now the white horse gave a convulsive shudder and crashed crop over withers down into oblivion, pinning his rider beneath him. The sword lay under the animal's leathern s a d d l e, snapped in two at the hilt.

"Damn all white stallions!" growled the Dead Man, hauling himself out from the great steed's crushing weight. He looked ruefully at the beast for a minute, then turned and began to run toward the forest. His saddle-cramped muscles shrieked protestingly, and unceasing the rain hissed down.

A LITTLE later he stumbled up a rise and glanced fearfully back over his shoulder. An inarticulate noise of fear tore his throat. Turning, he dashed clumsily down the slope and, floundering in ankle-deep watery muck, plunged on toward the trees. A firmer soil gave momentary respite, and here he bounded along in great panicky strides. A grey boulder seemed to leap suddenly into his path. It flung him down; he struggled to his feet screaming in unreasoning fright and fled on, satin Eastern garments shredded into muddy rags, hands and knees bleeding. Panic that knows no reason held him and drove him to the forest.

The gloom-grey scrubland gave way to trees at last. The hunted man gained their edge, fell sprawling on his face, and with a sobbing gulp picked himself up and again ran on.

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Among the dark crowding trees cold terror tingled the Dead Man's spine and replaced the blind unthinking panic. Rain, dripping endlessly from multitudinous surfaces, patterned "beware, beware" in his ear. He shivered. Death abounded here in the great grey rocks heartlessly exposed by rain, in the moss-draped crumbling oaks, in all the rotting woodland. A clammy wind talked to itself of evil. Horror crept from the wet dead leaves that carpeted the dim aisle he followed, and the Dead Man was afraid.

He was to be trapped and murdered like a hare, here in this forsaken place of darkness where no sunlight ever came.

Stumbling, he fell and lay with his face smothered in rank leaves, his body twitching with sudden racking sobs of fear. He had faced wild beasts and wilder men, had been a Frankish galley-slave and a Mediterranean pirate and an English highwayman, and never before had he been afraid to die. But here in the autumn forest he was afraid.

He sprang suddenly to his feet.

Facing him a dozen yards off stood a tall, ancient, golden man, whose long beard straggled damply over a barrel chest. Turbanned and robed, sandalled in Far Eastern fashion he held a mighty scimitar before him.

The Dead Man straightened and drew a hand wearily across his muddy, streaked face. Ibn ben Usuf Fetata strode quickly across the dusky glade, burly assassins pressing behind him. Vengeful, fanatical eyes glowed green as he swung up his scimitar.

The Dead Man took courage all at once, and his thin boyish lips curved in a derisive smile. . . .

IT TOOK Teddy nearly five minutes to get rid of his caller.

"But Teddy, *darling,*" she purred wonderingly. "I do *so* want to see you tonight . . ."

Teddy bounded up the stairs expectantly, threw open the door, exclaimed, "Well, what did—" and fainted.

Ran Foxe lay dead in a widening pool of blood, the skull mask in its velvet sheath crushed under his twisted face. His hands, flung wide in death agony, clutched something which Ladygirl nosed in canine curiosity.

But she was disappointed.

So far as her nose could tell her, this was only a sodden little heap of dead, decayed autumn leaves, rotted with rain.

THE END

SCIENCE CONQUERS AGE—IN CONCRETE!

RECENTLY the United States Rubber Company announced that their research department had developed a new product that will extend the useful life of concrete. They have called their product Hydron and it is used as a lining in the forms that mold the concrete.

Hydron does its work by absorbing the water and removing the tiny bubbles of air that form in the concrete as it is poured into the forms. With moisture and air removed, the concrete possesses greater strength and a smooth finish to withstand the weather and abrasion. The Hydron linings are railed or stapled to the usual concrete forms. After the concrete has been poured and set, the forms are removed in the usual manner and the Hydron is peeled from the concrete.

Claims for the effectiveness of Hydron are based on extensive tests made in the laboratory. One test for strength consisted of placing samples of ordinary cement and Hydron produced cement two inches from an air blast shooting steel gut under a pressure of twenty pounds per square inch. In one minute the gut blast produced a hole ¼ inch deep in the ordinary cement, but against the Hydron produced cement the mark was hardly noticeable.

The samples were also given a weather test in which they were first frozen and then thawed out. The concrete produced with the aid of Hydron went through four times as many of these cycles as did the cement produced in the old way.

—*Carter T. Wainwright.*

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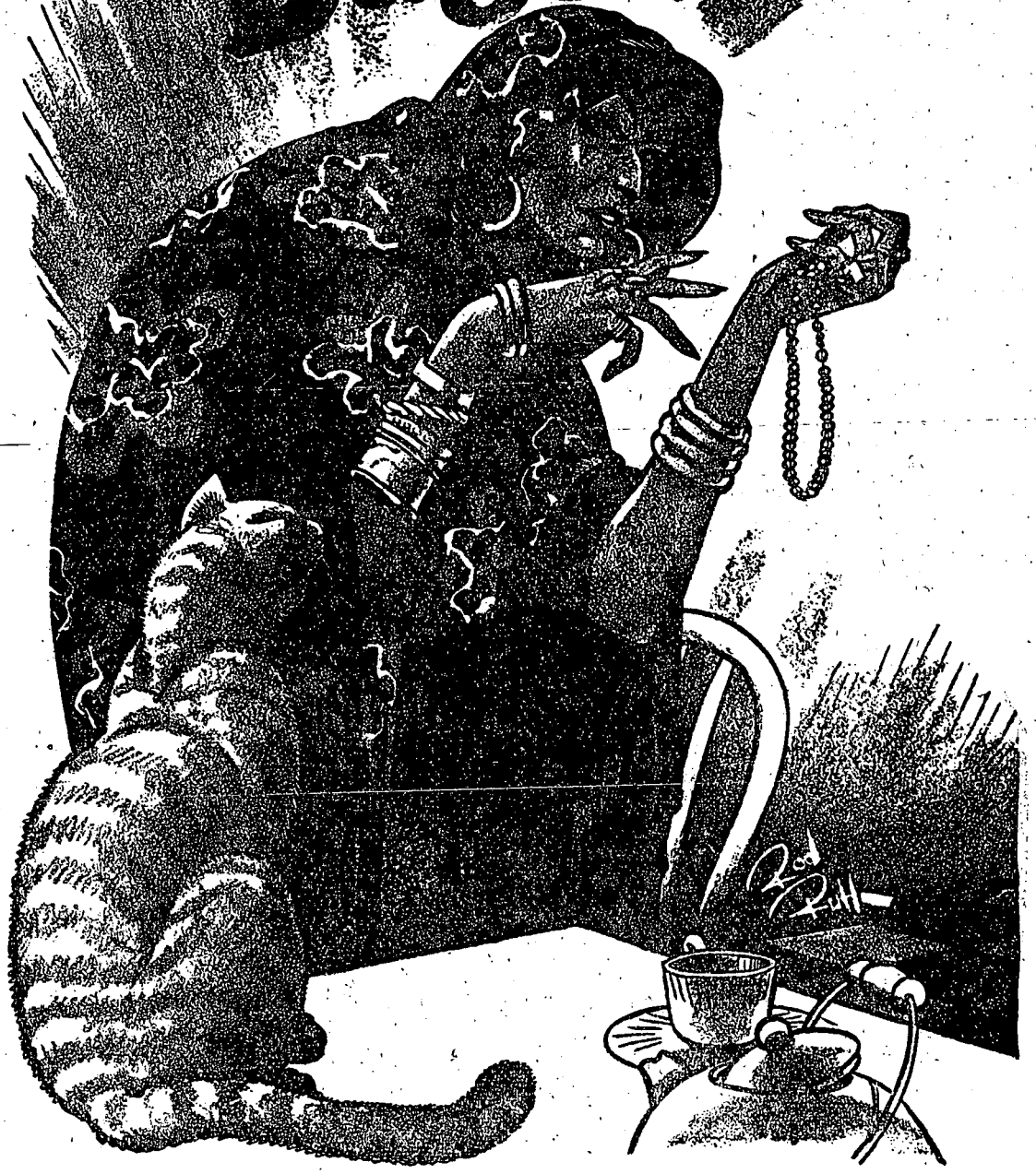
Bag and Baggage



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When Dolly's husband called her a "bag", he meant it—but he didn't mean it in a strictly literal sense

By William Lawrence Hamling

"HEY, Dolly! Where the devil are you — I've got company!"

Dolly Pringle heard the front door slam and hurried out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a small white apron.

"Tad? Is that you?" she called.

"Who did you expect?—the milkman?"

Someone guffawed as she reached the living room. She stood in the doorway and bit her lips.

"Tad. You've been drinking again!"

Tad Pringle twisted his five-feet-five around and faced his wife with red-tinged eyes. His gray tweed suit was rumpled out of shape and his tie was pulled open at his throat. He grinned foolishly up at a hulking fellow in blue sailor togs, holding a white cap in fumbling, thick fingers.

"She says I've been drinking! Meet the bag, Cap'n. My old faithful bag!"

There was another guffaw and Tad Pringle was nearly bowled over by a rollicking slap on his shoulder. He found his way feebly into a chair.

"Tad! Is that any way to introduce me? Please don't call me that name!"

"Hah! Ain't that just like a woman,

"You mean that it is a gift? It will bring me luck!"

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Cap'n? They don't like to be called bags—even when they look like one!"

"Tad!" Dolly Pringle felt her face flushing and embarrassed red. She bit her lips to keep them from trembling.

Tad waved his hand toward the visitor. "Meet Cap'n Jasper. The Cap'n and I are old friends. He runs one of the excersh—one of the party boats down on the river."

Dolly stared up at a pair of shaggy eyebrows hanging like a clump of wild grass over a rocky cliff. The eyes beneath them were wide and black. A grin pulled at the corners of a thick, shapeless mouth.

"Pleased to meet you," he said.

Tad Pringle hooked a leg over the side of the chair and looked up at his wife. "Go fix us some drinks, bag. The Cap and I want to talk. He's invited me for a trip over the week-end."

"A trip?" Dolly said hopefully. "You mean we're going on his boat?"

"I didn't say nothing about *we!*" Tad mumbled. "I said *I* was going. Hell, can't I go anywhere without you tagging along?"

Dolly turned away and felt tears rushing to her eyes. "You mean you're going to leave me again—is that it, Tad?" She turned wet eyes on him. "Why can't we go on a trip together—like we used to?"

"Who wants an old bag like you along!" Tad thundered. "Go get us some drinks!"

Dolly looked over at the Captain. He had turned his eyes away and was busy fumbling with his hat. She didn't have to see his eyes to know what he was thinking.

"Well? What are you standing there for? Go get us some drinks!"

Dolly moved toward her husband and the tears were rolling down her face.

"You can call me an old bag, Tad. I can't stop you. But you won't order me around in my house! If you want anything to drink you can take your drunken friends somewhere else!"

Tad looked angrily up at his wife. He got slowly to his feet and grabbed the Captain by the arm.

"Very well, if that's the way you want it!" he shouted. "I'll go somewhere else. And don't be surprised if I don't come back!"

He slammed out of the door and Dolly heard him say: "These bags are all alike, Cap'n. Never get hitched to one!"

Dolly ran into the kitchen, sobbing.

THE afternoon sun was streaming in through the kitchen window when Dolly Pringle stacked away the last of the dishes. She wiped her hands slowly and dropped the dish towel on the sink. She glanced into the mirror standing on the window-sill and sighed.

"I'm not old yet. Even if I am forty and a little plump."

She felt her hips and remembered the slim lines she used to have. In those days she had been smaller than Tad. Now it was the other way around. Her lips quivered as she looked out the kitchen window.

The outside world wasn't changing. It always seemed the same. There were the same green lawns and little white houses stretching in a row down to the banks of the river. It was a nice exclusive little section of the city. It was still young. Somewhere down the river she heard a boat whistle tooting.

"Maybe I *am* getting to be an old bag, Tad," she said wistfully. "But I do wish you wouldn't call me one. I do wish we could go away together again . . . ."

She heard a soft knocking at the back door.

She turned away from the sink and

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walked over to the kitchen door. She peered through the curtains.

An old wrinkled face was smiling in at her. It was a face that seemed to have weathered a thousand storms and years. It was deeply tanned, like a piece of old leather, with creases and cracks running up and down shaping the ancient contours into a grotesque mask. Two black beady eyes burned from a fold of the wrinkles, and Dolly caught a glimpse of stumpy yellowed teeth as the thin crease that served for a mouth parted in a weird grin.

Dolly felt a shudder of revulsion sweep through her and was about to turn away when the old hag lifted a trembling hand and she saw the wrinkled mouth forming words. Slowly she opened the door.

"Yes? What is it?"

A high tremulous cackle of laughter met her. "Don't be afraid of an old gypsy woman, my dear. I am very tired and thirsty. Would you be so kind and let me have a glass of water?"

Dolly got a full view of the old gypsy then. She was dressed in a faded but colorful dress of silks and satin. There was a large gold-colored necklace of beads and strangely carved pieces of metal hanging down from her throat. Two large gold spangles hung from pierced ears.

"Why—why of course. Just a moment."

Dolly flicked open the latch on the screen door and went back to the sink. She drew a glass of cold water and turned. The gypsy was standing in the kitchen beside her.

"I hope you don't mind my coming in. I can see that you are a very kind woman. May I sit down for a few moments?"

DOLLY nodded slowly and held out the glass of water. The gypsy took it bobbing her head gratefully. She sank into a chair beside the kitchen table. Dolly almost expected to hear bones creaking but there was no sound.

"Thank you, my dear," the gypsy said after a moment. "That was very good. And now I'd like to do something in return for your kindness."

Dolly frowned. "For me? Why I don't want anything."

"I could tell your fortune. You have a very nice hand. It would be easy to read."

Dolly shook her head. "I don't believe in such things. Besides, Tad wouldn't like it."

The gypsy grinned, showing the yellowed stumps of her teeth. "Ah, yes, Tad. Your husband. A very ungrateful man. He doesn't appreciate you, my dear. Men are such fools."

Dolly looked at the gypsy with sudden suspicion. But she couldn't conceal the interest that suddenly showed in her eyes.

"How do you know about my husband?"

The gypsy laughed, a thin high laughter like the sound of stiff paper being crumpled.

"I know many things, my dear. I have lived a long time. I have been many places and seen many things. I can tell when people are troubled. Would you like to tell me about it? Maybe I can help you."

Dolly forced her eyes away from the gypsy. There was almost a magnetic quality to the old hag's eyes. They seemed to peer into her, through her, almost as if she could read her very thoughts.

"I told you I don't believe in such things. And you couldn't help me . . ."

Dolly's voice trailed off. She heard the gypsy laugh again.

"Your husband is a foolish man, my dear. He calls you names. He leaves

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you alone and goes out with his friends. Are you sure you wouldn't like to talk about it?"

Dolly felt her face grow red. She heard herself gasp in amazement.

"How did you know that?" she asked nervously.

The gypsy motioned to a chair beside her. "Won't you sit down and talk? It might help to tell someone what is troubling you."

Dolly sank slowly into the chair. She was very close to the gypsy. She could even smell a faint perfume. It was an odor she had never known—soft, soothing, pleasing. Dolly looked into the gypsy's eyes and saw a friendly appeal waiting. She relaxed.

"Yes, maybe I would like to talk about it. I don't know what is the matter with Tad. He used to be so nice to me; we went on trips together, and had such nice times. But during the past few years he's drifted away from me. Now I'm only his old bag . . ."

She closed her eyes and her lips quivered.

"He calls you that all the time. He even uses it when visitors are in the house, doesn't he?" The gypsy's voice seemed to come from a far way off. Dolly nodded.

"Yes, and today he told me he's going on a trip down the river over the week-end. I wanted to go along, but he wouldn't let me."

The gypsy bobbed her head slowly. "Do you really want to go away with your husband, my dear? Are you sure you don't want to leave him?"

Dolly raised her head. "I still love Tad. I think I will always love him, even after the way he treats me. I want to be with him always."

"Always." The word crackled as an echoe from the gypsy. "You want to be with him always, even as his old bag?"

Dolly felt a tear slip down her cheek. "Yes," she sobbed. "Even as his old bag."

Dolly felt her hand being lifted. She looked down. The gypsy had reached over with a gnarled and ancient fist. She held Dolly's hand firmly.

"Here, my dear; isn't this a pretty necklace?"

Dolly felt her hand touch the gold necklace hanging from the gypsy's throat. Something tingled up her arm, made her body warm and glowing. Unconsciously her fingers took hold of the curious bits of metal.

The voice seemed to come from a long way off. It wasn't old and cracking now. It was like a soft flow of music from some distant organ. Dolly tried to focus her eyes, but she was suddenly very tired. Her body tingled with the soothing sounds. She wanted to sleep. She felt herself drifting away. . . .

. . . The gypsy closed the kitchen door behind her as she left. On the porch she paused to look back through the parted curtains. The kitchen was the same except for a large empty bag lying on the floor beside the table.

A long cackle of laughter echoed into the house.

NIGHT was warm and silent around the house. From the river came the soft toot of a boat-whistle heading along the stream. Then footsteps creaked on the back porch steps.

"Take it easy, Joe. You want to wake everybody in the neighborhood?" a voice whispered in the darkness.

"Hey, what the hell . . . the door's open!"

"Quiet!" the voice hissed. "Take it easy!"

Two shadowy figures entered the kitchen. "Keep your gat ready, Joe. Just in case," the voice whispered.

"Wonder what we'll find here?" the other shadow muttered. "I don't like

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this house-to-house racket. What the—"

There was a stumbling in the darkness. A muffled curse came up from the floor.

"What's wrong?"

"I tripped over something," the voice whispered. "Here, it's a big empty bag!"

"Good, we'll load the silverware and stuff in it."

Silently they stole through the kitchen and into the living room. The soft scraping of drawers being pulled open was the only sound.

Suddenly there was something else. A key turned in the lock of the front door.

"Quick, get out of sight!" one of the voices hissed.

The front door flew open and someone stomped noisily into the house.

"Hey, Dolly, where are you? Hey, bag!"

A shadow streaked across the room. "Stick 'em up, bud, and keep quiet!"

Tad Pringle felt something hard being shoved into his back.

"Burglars!" he shouted. "Help, police!"

There was a dull, muffled plop. Then a louder plop. Tad groaned and slumped to the floor.

"Damn you! You shot him!" a voice cried out.

"Quiet! What the hell did you expect me to do—he was yelling for the cops!"

"God, what are we going to do? This is murder!"

"Yeh, yeh, I know. We'll have to get rid of the body."

"You fool! Why did you have to shoot? How can we get rid of it?"

Something rustled in the darkness. "Here—this bag we found in the kitchen—we'll stuff him inside."

"What good will that do?" the other voice asked.

"You dummy, we'll toss it in the river! Nobody will ever know!"

THE night was very silent along the river. Overhead the moon peeped faintly through filmy cloudbanks and caught two shadows moving across a stone embankment. They were bent over, struggling under a burden.

There was a faint splash as something heavy hit the water. It moved out into the current, a shapeless mass of cloth, sinking slowly into the swirling depths.

"Have a good trip!" a voice whispered from the river's edge. Then the two shadows moved away into the night.

Out in the river a boat whistle tooted. Something floated by unseen. It drifted deeper, sluggishly on its way —bag and baggage.

THE END

HYSTERIA OR BLINDNESS?

ACCORDING to Dr. Frederick Lemere of Seattle, brain waves will, in most cases, show whether blindness is real or just the result of hysteria. The test makes use of the alpha waves of the brain which are produced only when the eyes are shut. When a person opens his eyes and sees an object, the alpha waves are broken up.

Thus, if a person is truly blind, when he tries to look at an object, the alpha rays will continue and Dr. Lemere believes that this shows the person has not sufficient vision to distinguish objects. However, if the person is faking, when he opens his eyes and looks about, the alpha waves cease and this shows that at least the person's vision is sufficient to distinguish objects. This, in most cases, indicates the person is suffering from hysterical blindness.

Dr. Lemere does not claim that the test is completely infallible since some people do not produce the alpha waves when their eyes are open or closed and thus the test will not work in their cases.

However, the test does hold out a threat to men planning on becoming draft dodgers by faking blindness.—*A. Morris.*

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Choking vapor clutched at his nostrils and mouth, strangling him

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FINGERPRINTS OF FEAR

By RICHARD CASEY

It seemed a good way to collect insurance. Death by fire was a horrible death, to be sure, but it was hard to prove such a death was murder.

WHEN I came slowly from under the effects of the ether, I was tied to a bed in a strange room. Warren Serge and Peter Larrs were near me. Before I felt any urge to open my eyes, I heard them speaking to each other in low, excited voices.

"Better get it over with before he comes around."

I recognized Warren Serge's flat voice. "I got the gasoline."

"Good." I knew that Peter Larrs was smiling, because his thin, bloodless lips were curled perpetually into a sour smile. "Be sure that the blankets and the mattress are well saturated."

I knew with sudden stark horror why they had forced the wet cloth over my face. Why they had filled me with whiskey to make me weak and unsuspecting. I thought I was awake enough now to fight. I opened my eyes and tried to sit up. It was a mistake. I realized that my arms and legs were bound firmly to the bed.

The room was lighted by a single dirty bulb. This was one of the dilapidated apartment buildings that lined High Street. One of those three-story wooden affairs that could become a dry funeral pyre when touched by flame. I had seen them burn before.

"Get him." It was Serge's voice. "He's coming around."

I sank back, my heart pounding. I was weak from the effects of whiskey and whatever they had added to it. Larrs' shadow crossed my face and I twisted around to catch sight of him.

"Pete," I managed to moan weakly. "Pete, for God's sake. . . !"

"Shut up." He had an empty bottle in his hand. I read hatred and fear on his pimply face. He was afraid that after their plan had gone so far I might cry for help and spoil everything. I tried to dodge as the bottle came down. I could move my head only a few inches. It wasn't enough.

THE blow couldn't have been hard or I would have died then. Instead, there whirled through my brain the memory of a series of incidents that had made these men want to murder me.

It's quite simple, I suppose, to murder a man. Simple when the reward is great and the chance of being caught is slim.

It all went back to the conversation at the Owl Club a month before. Pete Larrs and Warren Serge worked for me. We sold insurance, but not to the extent of growing rich on the profits. Then,

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because we had just finished discussing a case where a widow collected fifty thousand dollars on a husband who died under suspicious circumstances, the conversation drifted around to our own drab lives.

"Take Serge here," Peter Larrs said to me. "Suppose we took out a big policy on him and he died in six months. You and I could retire on the proceeds, Walter."

My name is Walter Peterson.

I grinned sourly. It wasn't my idea of a joke.

"Or you, for that matter," I suggested.

Much to my disgust they both insisted on arguing the idea to a logical conclusion. By the time we were finished, we had figuratively murdered Warren Serge, collected twenty-five thousand apiece and left town. Three insurance agents, schooled in the game we played, letting our minds wander in a manner that might well be dangerous.

I HAD forgotten all about it until tonight. Then, when Serge faced me across the table in Jimmy Caputo's back room, I knew what had happened.

"You're getting pretty tight," Serge said. He stared at me without blinking, his hand curved around the top of a Scotch bottle. "Maybe we better take you home."

"Yeah," Peter Larrs said. "Another hour of this and your widow might be collecting that five thousand life insurance."

I remembered how we had talked about insurance, and I stared suspiciously at Serge's dark ugly face and his gleaming teeth.

"That isn't funny," I said. My voice was thick and I had a difficult time with my words.

"Of course it isn't," Larrs agreed. His face was close to mine. "How did that last drink taste, Walt?"

I could see him, but not clearly. His face turned to a white patch of skin, then blurred out until I could only see two blood-shot eyes.

"Not . . . so . . ."

I felt myself slipping and grabbed for the Scotch bottle that was standing on the table. I missed it and fell. My head struck the edge of the table.

I heard Peter Larrs chuckle.

I awakened again and by now my head felt as though it had been hammered on the torture rack. I remembered reading that they used to tie a criminal on a rack and break his body, blow after blow, with a heavy sledge. The torturers would hammer on one bone, then the next and listen to the poor devil scream until he was nothing but a mass of mince-meat.

That's how I felt. I didn't open my eyes because I knew that Serge and Larrs were still in the room. I knew that if I showed any sign of life they would hit me again and I couldn't stand that.

The room was quite cool and I wondered why I was sweating so much. Then I realized that it wasn't sweat. It was gasoline. The sharp, pungent odor hit my nostrils.

Gasoline on the bed, poured over my entire body.

"What the hell are you waiting for?"

Serge's voice was jumpy, as though he was frightened to go on and afraid not to go on.

"Take your time," Larrs snarled. "This—this human torch stuff isn't so good for a man with nerves."

"Nerves?"

Serge's laugh wasn't the expression of pleasure I had expected. They were losing their nerve. Or were they? No! I heard footsteps approach the bed. I knew that to cry out again would only result in another blow on the head. I'd

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burn before I regained consciousness.

Perhaps if I lay very still they would have to rush from the house before the flames touched me. Perhaps I would break the ropes before it was too late.

The room was silent, save for the sudden crackle of flames. I heard the door open, then close. Footsteps pounded down the rickety stairs and I was alone—more alone than I had ever been in my life.

The heat from the very first was insufferable, but I didn't dare think of it because every ounce of strength in me worked for release.

My wrists were bound with heavy rope and the strands went under the bed and were tied there where I couldn't reach the knots.

THE fire started about ten feet from the bed, but it leaped along the trail where Larrs had poured the gasoline on the floor. It caught the edge of the mattress, leaped up and bathed me in a mass of red-yellow hell.

Everything about me, everything I wore, was burning with the intense heat that gasoline produces.

Then a strange thing happened. I have pondered over it many times since, and for a long time I could give no explanation.

Have you ever watched a man burn to death? Watched the body as the heat strikes it? The skin shrivels and the body seems to grow smaller, until it is a husk. Then the whole thing caves in upon itself and is gone.

I watched myself burn to death in that room.

Suddenly I was without pain. I seemed, somehow, to hover *above* the body on the bed. I watched because I had to watch. My eyes never faltered from the blackened sacrificial altar. A sacrifice to man's unholy love of money.

I watched what I have described and turned away only when my eyes could stand no more. I knew that I had seen a man destroyed. I knew that the entire building was afire and that before men could come to put out that fire, the building itself would collapse into the basement.

Two men were at large who would do this again. Do it because it was all quite simple and safe. They had within their grasp the sum of fifty thousand dollars. Money that was theirs to divide because I would never be able to appear again. Never be able to say that they had murdered me.

But I wasn't entirely helpless. What remained of me? I might have called it soul, had I been a religious man. Whatever it was, I was conscious of no feeling, no weight.

There were two men at large who would murder again—if I could not stop them.

BEHIND Terry Street, running south, there is an alley. After midnight the single light at the corner of Terry and Rand Boulevard sends its dim rays into the entrance of the alley. Beyond that, you might stumble over crates.

Peter Larrs usually took the short cut through the alley, opened the gate half way down and, by cutting across a neighbor's yard, entered his own home.

The darkness didn't bother Larrs. It didn't bother him even after Walter Peterson died. Peterson wasn't the kind of a guy who promoted fear. Warren Serge walked with Larrs as far as the corner of Terry and Rand. They stopped under the street light and shook hands.

"Sort of a partnership shake," Serge said. He was wearing a new blue suit, white shirt and a seven buck silk tie. He'd always wanted a seven buck tie.

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"And to think old Walt bought it for me," he said, fingering the silk.

Larrs grinned. "Fifty-fifty split on murder," he chuckled. "Remember that gang that called itself Murder, Incorporated? We oughta think up something like that."

They stood there, grinning at each other.

"Poor old Peterson," Larrs said. He turned and started across the street. Serge stood under the light, grinning until Larrs was near the entrance of the alley. Then the grin died.

"Poor old Larrs," he said. "I can work better alone. You've got a month to go, Larrs. Take advantage of it."

He turned with his hands buried deep in his pockets and moved slowly back along Terry Street toward town.

PETER LARRS was half way down the alley when he stopped whistling abruptly. He felt sick. Sick all the way through. He looked back at the faint light on the street he had left. An unreasonable horror crept over him.

He could smell gasoline. The odor stung his nostrils. He imagined he could smell the odor of burning flesh.

It wasn't cold, but he drew up his coat collar and walked faster. The horror followed him. Death smells like that, he thought, and stopped short by the gate that opened on the alley. His hand was on the gate when two steel hands closed about his throat. His mouth opened and he tried to shout. Smoke, choking black smoke shot into his mouth and seared his throat. He struggled, and was lifted from the ground, those hands holding firmly, refusing to give an inch under his clawing, desperate fingers.

His heels beat a tattoo of death on the alley gate, and from the back porch of a nearby house, a voice shouted.

"Hey! What the hell's going on out there?"

Larrs didn't hear the voice. He never knew what was going on.

"I'M damned if I know what happened, Inspector." The cop stood up slowly, his eyes on the crumpled body. "Someone called the station and said there was a brawl going on in the alley. The station sent out an alarm and we came right over."

Inspector Chance Rainey lowered his ponderous body to one knee and turned the body over.

"There's only one clue as far as I can see." He examined the broad black smudges that covered Peter Larrs' skinny neck. "Might have been one of those guys that unload coal. His hands were covered with soot."

The murderer's hands had been covered with soot, yet a check-up revealed that no coal had been delivered that afternoon within a six-block area. The autopsy was equally as puzzling. It revealed that Peter Larrs might have been dead before his body was dumped in the alley. His lungs were badly seared and he had breathed a lot of smoke.

Warren Serge knew that Larrs had died in the alley. He didn't mention his walk home with Larrs. He didn't mention it for several reasons. Larrs was better off out of the way, and Serge didn't want anything to do with it. He was already several thousand dollars richer.

WARREN SERGE was no coward. Yet, on rainy, cold nights like this one, he kept thinking of Larrs. Thinking of him starting alone down that dark alley. Serge wasn't entirely without imagination. As the weeks went by, his thoughts went back with increasing regularity to Peter Larrs and to Walter Peterson.

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He started avoiding dark places. He remembered the smoke they had found in Larrs' lungs and the dirty soot smudges on his throat. After a while, when the novelty of having a lot of money wore off, he wondered how Larrs *had* died. The police never found a clue that led to the murderer.

The night was rainy, and Serge moved swiftly toward Jimmy Caputo's Saloon. Caputo's joint was built back away from the street, taking up the rear end of several stores. You entered it from the alley, by following a covered board-walk from the street to the door with a small window. The window was a throwback to the old days when Jimmy looked you over carefully before letting you in.

Serge was soaked to the skin. His new overcoat dripped. Rain spotted his polished shoes. Rain swept wildly across the street in front of Jimmy Caputo's place, and Serge ran for the protection of the covered walk.

When Serge saw that the single light near the door was not burning, he had a terrible urge to turn away. However, the rain forced him on to the protection offered.

Half way along the walk, under the black screen of the canvas roof, he stopped. Had you stood beyond the walk, under the dry arc of the door, you might have heard the gurgle of fear that echoed in Serge's throat. That was the only sound, for his threshing about made no noise. Later, his heels kicked a light tattoo on the walk. Then there was no more sound as they kicked their last in mid-air.

Under the canvas that covered the walk the sickening smell of gasoline and burned flesh was still noticeable when the police car drove up. One of Jimmy Caputo's customers had stumbled over the corpse on his way out of the club.

MY NAME is Walter Peterson.

I said that I did not know what part of my body existed when I hovered in that room and watched my own flesh destroyed. I did not know then, but now it is clear to me.

They say that after death our physical bodies return to basic elements.

Ashes to ashes—dust to dust.

That is true, but there is more to it than that. A part of me hovered in mid-air.

What happens to a man's soul? I'm not sure, for I haven't travelled that far. I know only what happened to me. My soul, if you must call it that, was contained in the substance that rose above my lifeless body and went to seek revenge.

They can never find the man who murdered Warren Serge and Peter Larrs. They can never find him because he ceased to exist one hot afternoon when a mysterious fire swept the slums.

But Walter Peterson found a way to go on. They found smoke smudges on the throats of the murdered men. They found smoke in their lungs and the smell of gasoline around them.

Dust to dust? Well, in a way you're right. But I am not dust. I am smoke.

I am the smoke from a man who was destroyed by fire. I am done murdering. I hate no one, now that Larrs and Serge are gone. It is still raining fitfully, and beyond the doorway where I hover, I see police officers bending over the still figure of Warren Serge. I can hear them talking and I wish there was some way of telling them what really happened.

My job is done; and the rain, which I have carefully avoided for so long, is the only thing that will beat me down and destroy me.

The officer in the blue overcoat is talking and sniffing the air. He is very

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close to me. He shivers and pulls up his collar.

"That damned smoke is awful," he says. "Gawd, Inspector, it smells like —like someone is being cremated."

If I could smile, I would. If I float slowly from this dry door-way and drift out into the rain, I will be beaten to the pavement. Then you can use that fancy phrase of yours. What is it?

Dust to dust.

Why not? My mission has ended.

Vignettes OF FAMOUS SCIENTISTS

By ALEXANDER BLADE

Brahe

He was a pioneer of astronomy in the Sixteenth Century, and mankind owes a great debt to his brilliant career.

TYCHO BRAHE was the eldest son of a Swedish nobleman, and was born on December 14, 1546. At the age of thirteen he was so well grounded in Latin and the fundamentals of mathematics, that he was sent to the University of Copenhagen, to specialize in those studies which led up to the profession of the law, for which his uncle destined him. In the following year, an eclipse of the sun had been predicted for August 21st, and the educated world of the day was naturally excited over the coming event. When it began at the time set, Tycho was so moved that he resolved to make himself the master of a science that could foretell accurately an event so marvelous.

In 1562 he was transferred to the University of Leipsic to finish in law. But he exhibited no inclination for the profession, and when his uncle died in 1565, he went to Wittemberg in Saxony, early in the spring of 1566, but moved to Rostock in Mecklenburg the following year. Here he became involved in a quarrel with a Swedish nobleman, with whom he fought a duel with swords in total darkness, with the result that his opponent sliced off the entire front of his nose. The damage was repaired by cementing on artificial nose on his face, constructed of gold and silver, which for the balance of his life was worn without serious discomfort or disfigurement.

Late in 1568 he journeyed to Augsburg in Bavaria, and there made the acquaintance of the brothers John and Paul Hainzel, both astronomical enthusiasts, and also men of some means. To them he explained his desire to set up a quadrant of some twenty feet radius for observational purposes, the drawing for which so impressed them that they not only offered to bear the expense of constructing it, but to provide a suitable site for its installation in one of the suburbs of the city where Paul had a country home. To this was later added a sextant of 5-foot radius, and with these two primitive instruments many successful observations were made.

Towards the end of 1571 his Uncle Steno offered him quarters on his own extensive estates for an observatory, and when he learned that his gifted nephew was also interested in alchemy—which, at that time, was considered quite as reputable a field of inquiry as astronomy—agreed to provide him also with a fully equipped laboratory.

In the fall of the year 1572 a "nova" suddenly appeared in the constellation of Cassiopeia. It was first seen by Brahe on November 11th, but had been detected by others as early as in August. It was an unusually brilliant one, remaining visible for over a year, and disappearing only in March, 1574. At its maximum it was the equal of Sirius in brightness. Brahe was wonderfully impressed with the phenomenon, and made observations every clear night during its continuance, which later was published. These added so greatly to his reputation that the King, becoming interested, asked him to deliver a course of lectures on the subject. The year before Brahe had married a peasant girl, to the deep offense of his relatives. But the success of his lectures, and the favor with which they were received at Court, much more than overbalanced the displeasure of his relatives in the public mind.

Brahe, however, was so angered at the slights his wife received at their hands that he determined to abandon Sweden as a residence. He decided upon Basle, Switzerland as a desirable location, and making a visit to Venice, he began his return journey to Sweden to fetch his family to the new home.

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While preparing for the move he received an offer from the King of Denmark and Norway of a grant for life of the island of Huen, situated in the narrow strait between Denmark and Sweden, on which would be erected at royal expense all the buildings for such an observatory and laboratory as Brahe might plan, and equipped with all the instruments and appliances necessary for his work. The offer also included a liberal subvention to cover operating and maintenance costs, a house for his family and a salary for his support. Naturally, such a flattering proposal was at once accepted, and before the end of the year construction upon a most elaborate scale began. The ultimate total cost of the establishment was close to one million dollars, of which Brahe contributed nearly one-half, almost impoverishing himself in the operation. He gave it the name of Uranienborg.

Here Brahe passed the next twenty years of his life, during which he not only made a large number of valuable and important stellar and planetary observations that added greatly to the current stock of astronomical knowledge, but also spent much time in the laboratory in resultless experiments in alchemy.

In 1588 the King died, after a notable reign of 29 years. His son, Christian IV, who succeeded, was only 11 years old at the time, and naturally influenced and controlled by those around him. In 1591 this boy sovereign made his first visit to Uranienborg, accompanied by a large party of courtiers, some of whom disapproved strongly of the favors that had been bestowed on Brahe, and most of whom were more interested in pushing their own fortunes than in advancing the cause of science. Furthermore, an opinion prevailed that no discoveries of any importance or value to the State had resulted so far from the extensive and costly laboratory experiments that Brahe had been conducting. It was not long before these unfriendly individuals began to make trouble for him, and in 1597 his situation became so unpleasant that he moved his family from the island to Copenhagen, taking with him his smaller instruments, and all his books and notes. A little later he appears to have chartered a vessel, loaded into it as much of his larger instruments and chemical apparatus as could be easily moved, and with his family sailed for Rostock on the Mecklenburg coast. From there, having been cordially invited, he took his wife and children to the estate of his old friend Count Henry Rantzau, at the castle of Wandesburg, near the city of Hamburg.

Rantzau suggested an appeal to Emperor Rudolph of Bohemia, who was a notable patron of the mystical arts, and to make this as strong as possible Brahe went to work at once to compile a memoir of the results of his life's work to date. With that in manuscript form he started for Prague, and received a most royal welcome from the sovereign. Rudolph at once gave him a pension, a country estate, and finally offered the castle of Benach, in the suburbs of the city, as a site for his instruments and apparatus. In August, 1599, he took possession, sent an assistant to bring his large instruments from the island of Huen, and his family from Wandesburg. Later, finding that the surroundings of Benach were not as suitable for his work as he at first thought, he begged the Emperor to allow him residence in Prague. He was at once permitted to establish himself temporarily in the royal edifice, and to set up his instruments in its gardens or park, and in the buildings surrounding it. The Emperor then crowned his beneficences by purchasing a house for him in Prague, and Brahe moved into it with his family in February, 1601. But before the year had come to an end, and just as he was beginning to enjoy the comforts and honors of his new home, he became ill, and in less than two weeks passed away at the early age of less than fifty-five years.

In estimating his position as a scientific man it is necessary to remember that in his day the study of the heavens was carried on mainly in the hope of enabling the student to cast correct horoscopes, and that those who interested themselves in such work were really astrologers, and in no sense astronomers, as the word is used today. Furthermore, practically all the patrons of the art, the rulers and men of wealth who encouraged and supported celestial observation and study, did so mainly in the hope that discoveries might ensue that would redound to their material benefit. The same was true of the alchemistic art. Astronomy and chemistry were not yet sciences.

Brahe was really an astrologer and alchemist. He held to the Ptolemaic cosmology, and rejected that of Copernicus, not because the former appealed to his reason and the latter did not, but because the authorities of the Church of the day supported the one, and condemned the other. Into the matter of the reasonableness of this position he had no inclination to inquire. Therefore, though he was a brilliant and ingenious inventor of appliances for observational use, and with their aid made a very large number of observations of note, they led to nothing in the way of a better understanding of the cosmos. He was not a conscious pretender as he deceived no one more than he deceived himself. He was the unconscious egoist of his day, yet one of whose family life was clean and commendable, who attracted many sincere admirers, and who retained through life a few devoted friends.

Brahe's principal work, entitled "Astronomiae instauratae progymnasmata" was edited by Kepler. The first volume treated of the motions of the sun and moon, and gave the places of 777 fixed stars. His second main work was concerned with the comet of 1577, demonstrated from its insensible parallax to be no terrestrial exhalation, as supposed, but a body traversing planetary space.

He constructed a table of refractions, allowed for instrumental inaccuracies, and eliminated by averaging accidental errors. He, moreover, corrected the received value of nearly every astronomical quantity.

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Then, in ghastly tones, the dummy began to speak . . .

DUMMY OF DEATH

By LEROY YERXA

Delbert was large for a dummy, large enough to turn the tables and put Johnny Orchid, the ventriloquist, on his lap in their unusual act!

THE huge neon sign over the theatre entrance said, JOHNNY ORCHID SENSATIONAL VENTRILOQUIST AND HIS DRAMATIC DUMMY DELBERT. The sign had brought throngs of theatre goers to the Strand theatre for five straight weeks. Johnny Orchid had more dough than the knew how to spend. Enough of it to assure him of being able to return to Haiti for the extensive research work he had been doing on King Christophe's ancient citadel.

There was nothing about Johnny Orchid to suggest that he poured over old history books and spaded over and over the ancient soil in the high courtyard of the black tyrant's fort. Johnny Orchid was a gentleman, from the cuffs of his stiffly starched shirt to the shiny, patent leather shoes he had chosen for the stage. His thin, almost eager face and sparkling eyes told of his wonder at his swift rise to the bright lights.

He owed that to Delbert, the great wooden voodoo god he had brought from Haiti.

Someone nudged Orchid's elbow. He didn't look around for he had become accustomed to the jostle of New York crowds.

"Come on down out of the clouds," a friendly voice said. "That damned dummy of yours has turned over again."

The smile faded from Orchid's face as he looked down to the level of the passing crowd, then lower, to the top of Phillip Newton's white head. His eyes traveled over the thin, wrinkled face, to the straight lips of the small watchman.

"He's what?"

"Delbert's turned over," Newton said. "You left him lying on his left side when you went out after the first show. He's on his right side now."

Orchid swore. It wasn't in anger, just surprise and bewilderment.

"Look here, Newton," he said gravely, "that's been happening for three weeks. I'm giving you ten bucks a week to keep an eye on that dummy. I don't like the idea of people tampering with him, even if it's their idea of a joke."

The crowd was growing thicker before the ticket windows of the Strand. The second stage show was due to start in ten minutes. People jostled Phillip Newton's slight body until he retreated back against the wall of the building. Orchid followed, and they stood there staring at each other, worry in their eyes. Each suspected the other of having more to say than had been said. Each suspected something hidden, almost sinister in the fact that Delbert had been turned over again.

"I been watching that darn hunk of wood ever since you told me," Newton said in an aggrieved tone. "No one goes near the cabinet. No one has

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touched him tonight, but he's turned over."

"Probably got the heart-burn," Orchid said with the ghost of a smile. "I'm about due for the act. Suppose you watch twice as hard, and try leaving cheap whiskey alone for one night. That might have something to do with what's happening."

HE TURNED, fought his way toward the alley and sighed when he left the edge of the swirling crowd to find himself in the darkness beside the theatre. He mopped his forehead, and walked toward the stage door. A car swept past him, halted near the door and a girl climbed out. She wore a neat blue serge suit and small hat that hid few of her golden curls. Deep blue eyes twinkled at Johnny encouragingly.

"How's Delbert tonight?" she asked. "Been restless again?"

Orchid caught up with her and together they walked up the steps and into the dark region behind the stage. The orchestra out front was playing loudly, introducing the first act.

"Newton says Delbert has turned over again," Orchid said. "When I catch the practical joker that's having his fun at my expense, I'll wring his silly neck."

Joan Leland grasped his arm above the elbow and pretended to measure huge muscles with her fingers.

"Ooh! What a big strong giant!" She laughed playfully.

Johnny Orchid grinned. Maybe he was putting the act on a little thick. He had never been blessed with a very strong body. As the army had so fittingly expressed it, "Go home, son, you're wasting your time and ours."

Johnny Orchid hadn't gone home. He had gone to Haiti, found a little success at ventriloquism at Port Au Prince, hit on the idea of using a huge voodoo god for a dummy, and come back to New York to sweep them in the aisles with Delbert.

"You'd better get dressed," he told Joan Leland. "After you've watched Pete pull rabbits out of his hat, how about a steak with me? Finding a steak right now is a much better trick than Peter Leland, Magician Extraordinary, ever pulled on the stage."

The girl laughed.

"Pete makes a living for his sisters," she said proudly, "and without carrying a piano-sized dummy around the country."

Orchid took the point well.

"Delbert will be the death of me yet," he said. "Darn good thing he doesn't eat, or I'd have a bigger feed bill than P. T. Barnum did in his busiest days."

They parted, Joan Leland climbing into the upper regions back-stage to her dressing room, while Johnny Orchid went to see if Delbert was actually on his right side in the huge, coffin-like packing box. He reached the box, half hidden in the shadows and stared at the aged wooden dummy with frank disapproval. Delbert had really turned over again.

THE placard on the edge of the stage read—"Johnny Orchid and his friend Delbert." Out front the audience was laughing. Loud belly laughs and feminine giggles filled the place with mirth. The startling part of it all was the fact that Johnny hadn't as yet spoken a word. It had been this way every night.

Johnny Orchid had a sling arranged by ropes that hung from above, so that the heavy wooden god hung in the sling and Johnny sat on a chair beneath, giving the impression that Delbert was actually sitting on his knee. Delbert, so named by a press-agent, had been carved by primitive knives and pol-

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ished by centuries of rain and sun. Until his visit to New York, Delbert had been housed in a thatched hut on the shore of a jungle river. He sat through the ages, a huge tree trunk six feet in height, great painted red eyes, and a nose that hung down to his chin. Arms were there, projecting to his fat hips. The face, the arms, every inch of the jungle god, were representative of ancient dignity and horror.

As is so often true, uprooted from his own habitat, Delbert made a silly sight on a New York stage. Crowds paid a fortune to see him, and to laugh at his ill-proportioned body.

The laughter died out slowly. They were waiting. Johnny Orchid opened his lips slightly and sent a roaring, primitive voice from the wooden lips of the statue.

"Why so much silly laughter among you human jackals?"

It wasn't humor that caused new laughter to sweep through the audience. There was no humor. Perhaps the very thought of stern condemning speech coming from those harsh lips, caused it. Johnny Orchid was no fool. With Delbert, he was experimenting with a new type of entertainment. The same type that makes a man laugh when a waiter dumps a glass of milk down the neck of the diner beside him. Stark, animal humor that causes men to chuckle at the antics of two apes fighting to the death behind bars of the zoo.

Johnny said:

"Well, Delbert ol' pal, how are you feeling tonight?"

Again Delbert's voice seemed to take root deep in his wooden throat and pour out over the auditorium.

"Haven't been feeling so fit. New York weather is bad. Ought to do something about it."

Again the audience chuckled.

"And just what could we do? People talk about the weather but they don't do anything about it."

Delbert's voice was harsh, cruel:

"I'd do something about it! Call the witch doctors. Call on the Snake God. In Haiti, man does what he wishes by calling on the gods."

THE laughter wasn't so full-hearted this time. The words were spoken in such a harsh, inhuman voice that the audience marvelled at the ability of Orchid, as it had done from the first. Some thought him even more talented tonight. They didn't notice that his face had suddenly turned pale. There was a long pause. Then Johnny Orchid's voice came again, slowly, almost uncertainly.

"Suppose," he said in an unnatural tone, "we call in a god or two and bring on some of that weather you're talking about?"

Delbert's synthetic voice roared out again:

"You're a fool to play with emotions and powers of which you know so little," he said. "Do you imagine that man has been a fool throughout the centuries, simply because *these* low apes indulge in a fool's empty laughter?"

Johnny Orchid was using strong language. Stronger than he had ever used before. His spectators didn't entirely like it. A few laughed, probably at themselves. Several catcalls came from the balcony. Johnny Orchid thought fast. Just before he had entered the theatre, he felt that clammy, damp air that always preceded a storm. Now he grinned wanly.

"New York needs rain tonight," he said. "How about bringing that storm we need. Go ahead, Delbert, call on your god to bring rain."

The audience was holding its breath. The place was hushed. From the wings, Joan Leland stared at the pair in the spotlight. Her eyes were clouded. No

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smile touched her lips. A few actors and the stage manager stood together, watching Johnny Orchid.

"O God of Voodoo, by the Snake God of the deep places," Delbert's voice said in a low, rumbling tone, "cause rain to fall on these benighted sons of ignorance."

That was all, and no response greeted him. It was silent, as though they were waiting. Waiting for something they had never dreamed could happen, and couldn't believe now.

An old man in the front row stood up.

"I'm getting out of here," he said. He hadn't spoken loudly, but his voice carried back to the last row of the theatre. People began to shuffle their feet nervously.

A drop of water hit the edge of the stage and sizzled as it touched a footlight. Then another, and another. Johnny Orchid slipped out from under Delbert and stood up. He wanted to leave the stage, and yet he didn't dare.

"Good God!" a masculine voice shouted, "it's raining."

IT *WAS* raining. Water, first a drizzle that dampened the floor, then a downpour of water that grew loud, sweeping from the ceiling, pouring down on the audience. A wild scramble ensued as men and women sought to reach the doors. They poured out of the aisles and toward the exits. The manager rushed out upon the stage and tried to make his voice heard above the sound of the throng.

"Don't leave! The sprinkling system has been tampered with. Everything will be in order."

No one heard him. No one but Johnny Orchid.

Then the stage was deserted, and Johnny Orchid was standing close to Joan Leland in the wings. Theatre people gathered in little groups, talking in awed voices. The manager was arguing loudly with the men who ran the show backstage.

Johnny Orchid heard one of them say:

"We checked everything. The sprinkling system is okay. That damned dummy really made it rain, and right inside the Strand!"

Joan clutched Orchid's hand tightly.

"Johnny." She kept repeating his name over and over, her frightened eyes staring into his. "Johnny—what——"

"I don't know," he said humbly. "I don't know . . ."

"But—the water. Where did it come from? Why did you change your routine? They'll hate you. They'll call it witchcraft."

"I couldn't help it," he admitted. "You thought that was my voice? It wasn't. After it happened, I tried to go through with it and make the best of a bad show."

Her lips parted with wonder.

"You don't mean—Delbert?"

Johnny Orchid nodded miserably.

"I do. I couldn't say a word out there on the stage. The voices you heard both came from Delbert. *I was the dummy.*"

SPENCER WALLACE came into Johnny Orchid's dressing room. Orchid was removing the make-up from his face and trying desperately to think of a way out. He watched Wallace through the mirror, wondering what kind of revenge the manager of the Strand would want for emptying the theatre in the middle of the show.

Wallace strode up and down the room, then turned and looked at Johnny Orchid's back.

"Well," he said, "what happened?"

Johnny Orchid didn't know. He had a hunch, but it wouldn't be wise to air it at the present time.

"The sprinkling system went hay-

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wire, didn't it?" he asked innocently.

"You know damned well it didn't. You made some kind of a charm with that wooden dummy of yours. That was rain that fell out there."

Johnny Orchid tried to grin. He turned around and faced his boss.

"Now Mr. Wallace," he said in a tired voice, "surely they haven't fed you a story like that? How could it rain inside a theatre?"

Spencer Wallace was a short, rather stout man with a naturally pink face. Now it turned several shades darker.

"I—I'm damned if I know," he admitted. "I looked at those sprinkling heads myself. They haven't been turned on."

"The roof was leaking," Johnny suggested.

Wallace grinned sourly.

"*Now* who's suggesting the impossible?" he asked.

Johnny Orchid was thinking of that twelve-week contract and the money that had been coming in every week. He was trying to avoid the quarrel he considered inevitable.

"I know you're ready to fire me," he admitted. "But, Mr. Wallace, I can't be responsible for every strange accident that happens in your theatre. You know as well as I do that I can't start rain pouring from the ceiling with a lot of double talk and the help of a piece of wood."

Spencer Wallace shook his head.

"I don't know how or why it happened," he admitted, "but it did."

Orchid frowned.

"And I'm on my way out now," he said sadly. "I'm packing."

Wallace cleared his throat several time.

"I wouldn't be too hasty about leaving," he said. "I'll raise your salary fifty a week and give you a percentage on anything over the normal profits, until you get ready to leave the Strand."

JOHNNY ORCHID dropped a jar of make-up cream and tried to recover it as it rolled under the table. He made strange, animal-like sounds in his throat and seemed to be choking. When he managed to sit up again, his face was the color of beet-juice.

"You'll what?"

"I'll give you fifty more a week," Wallace said eagerly. "Seventy-five, if you think that isn't enough."

By this time, Orchid had control of himself. He leaned back against the dressing table and crossed his legs. He looked very business-like.

"No more rain storms though," Wallace said hastily, before Orchid could speak. "The papers are on the streets already, telling about the downpour. They all think it was a fake, but one of the cleverest publicity gags that has happened in years."

Orchid remained silent. He could learn more right now by listening.

"The house is packed," Wallace went on. "They demand another performance tonight. I talked with Reynolds, critic from the *Times*. He says you've got one of the finest voice changes he's ever heard. Says it startled him. He could have sworn that the dummy was talking."

"He had nothing on me," Johnny admitted. "I was under that impression myself."

Wallace smiled.

"Cut the kidding," he said, "and get back out there on the stage. Reynolds said you ought to sit on the dummy's lap and reverse the act. It ought to be worth some extra laughs. But listen, no more of that rain business. It's expensive."

Johnny Orchid felt wonderful, in a way, but a queer dread still hung over him. Maybe this was only the begin-

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ning. He wasn't quite sure how it could happen, but he was going to be careful after tonight that the conversation didn't veer around to the weather.

"No rain," he promised and started for the door.

"Go on right after the next act is over," Wallace said. "Take all the time you want. Give the morning papers something to rave about."

ORCHID went down the stairs on the double to find Joan Leland and her brother still on the stage with their act. It was reaching the rabbit and hat trick, and he had just time to step outside and buy a paper. He stopped beside the box in which Delbert had been placed, opened the lid and looked inside. Delbert was lying on his right side, his cracked, aged old timbers glistening with water. He looked younger somehow, bathed by the water that had fallen on the stage. Uneasily, Johnny Orchid closed the cover and went out the stage door into the alley. Out front he found a long line of would-be patrons waiting at the ticket window. He bought a paper and read the headlines as he went in.

VENTRILOQUIST PERFORMS
STARTLING RAIN TRICK
Rain Falls On Audience At Strand And
Ventriloquist Proves That His Act
Is Not All Wet

He was reading the story under Reynolds' by-line as he reached the door. He stopped suddenly, the hair on his neck prickling with a sudden feeling of impending disaster. An ear-slitting scream came from somewhere in the vast, dim world back-stage. Johnny Orchid started to run. He noticed, as he passed the wings, that John Leland had left the stage, and the orchestra was introducing the tumbling act. The orchestra seemed to pause with the scream, then played louder than ever. Heads turned this way and that. He heard the stage manager, half hidden among the props, speak in a low, hoarse voice.

"One of you guys get up to the dressing rooms. There's someone in trouble."

Footsteps sounded behind Orchid as he ran up the three flights of iron stairs toward the line of women's dressing rooms. He couldn't know who had screamed, but the very silence that followed the outcry made him feel that he was urgently needed.

He saw a number of girls in the hall, carrying towels, clad in odds and ends of their wardrobe.

Joan Leland was at his side.

"Thank God," Johnny said. "I thought for a minute . . ."

"Johnny! That scream. It was horrible. It seemed to come from Eve's room."

Eve Leland and Joan might have been twins. Eve danced in the chorus. She looked and acted so much like Joan that they could have doubled for each other. Orchid reached the door of Eve's room. He jerked the doorknob and it fell loose in his hand, broken on the inside. He kicked the door with his foot and the frail plywood panel broke under the blow. A stage hand caught up with them.

"Get away from there!" he said. He was a big man with a desperate, brooding expression on his face. He put his shoulder to the door and pushed just once. The door buckled in and fell to the floor. Behind Orchid, Joan put her hand over her mouth quickly to suppress a scream. Then she was sobbing pitifully, trying to force her way past him into the tiny room.

JOHNNY ORCHID held her back while the stage-hand went in. The

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man bent over the slim, partly clad form lying on the floor. He stood up again, and turned to face Johnny Orchid. He didn't speak. He didn't have to. Eve Leland's body was stretched across a trunk, and where her head should have been, there was nothing. In one corner, like a broken pumpkin, lay a mass of red pulp and matted hair.

It didn't look as though the murderer had used a knife, Johnny thought, with sickness growing inside him.

It looked as though something with horrible strength had torn the head away from the body.

The hall was filled with people now, all talking excitedly. Johnny drew Joan away from the door, pushed her gently along the hall and through the crowd. Then a big, good-natured redhead was speaking to him.

"My name's Reynolds, of the *Times*. Heard about some trouble back here."

Johnny motioned toward the door of Eve's room.

"Murder," he said.

He heard Reynolds whistle softly and then he was alone with Joan, trying to comfort her. He didn't talk. This wasn't the time to talk. He put an arm around her waist, got her to her dressing room and found a cold towel for her forehead. Then her brother said a few words to Johnny that didn't make much sense, but had to do with rage and horror and grief. Johnny Orchid went out and left them together. He wandered downstairs. A police siren was howling in the distance, but he didn't really hear it.

He was thinking about something else. He was thinking that poor Eve Leland had had no enemies. Eve had looked like Joan. Exactly like her. He and Joan had been close during these past weeks. And now they were engaged to be married.

Johnny Orchid remembered too clearly how that h e a d h a d been wretched free of Eve's body, like a plant torn from the soft earth. How the inside doorknob had been pulled from the door, breaking the bolt cleanly in two.

He went toward Delbert's box and lifted the cover. The dummy was as he had left it, lying on its right side. He stared fixedly at the huge, carved hands, big enough to break a man in two, were they of flesh and blood. He shrugged, disgusted at himself for being so foolish. He closed the lid of the box and stared at the hinge that hung there without a lock.

Then he went upstairs and brought down the heavy padlock which he used when he was on the road. He slipped it through the hinge and snapped it together. Somehow a vast load was lifted from his mind when he went back up to Eve's dressing room. There remained a vague, uneasy feeling that he might have been able to prevent the murder. He wasn't sure that the right girl had died. From now on he would have to take extra precautions to make sure that Joan was never left alone.

THE police were not the ignorant, story-book variety of blundering idiots. They investigated quietly, never letting a clue escape careful scrutiny, never giving up. But three weeks had passed since the night Eve Leland died and they hadn't come far.

Johnny Orchid knew it when they questioned him time after time. He told his story carefully and honestly. He didn't mention the old superstitions that had arisen to drive him half mad. He wasn't trying to protect anyone or —he shuddered—*anything*. God knew if Joan were to suffer the same fate he would never forgive himself. It wasn't that he needed to protect anything. He just wasn't sure.

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If he started to tell the police about voodoo curses, they would lock him up, but not for murder. He couldn't let that happen, because Johnny Orchid was pretty sure that he owned a murderer. He had to make sure beyond a doubt, and after that, he had a job to do.

He could destroy Delbert at once. Oh yes, Johnny Orchid had thought of that. He could have the box, Delbert in it, carted away and burned. If he did, perhaps his guard would relax. Perhaps he'd let down. Let down while the murderer, the *real* murderer had another chance at Joan.

No, Delbert had to remain alive. For several reasons, he had to be given his freedom. Johnny Orchid needed that contract with the Strand. Without Delbert, he might as well pack his bags and get out. That would take him away from Joan. Away from the very thing that made a future for Joan and him possible.

Perhaps it was his imagination. Perhaps Delbert could talk, and only that. He had nothing concrete to give foundation to his distrust of Delbert. Just that vague, uneasy feeling a man gets when he isn't quite sure.

Delbert had to remain free. Had to show his hand. Meanwhile, the contract remained to bring in the necessary cash, and Johnny Orchid could stay in the theatre, stay close to Joan every minute.

THE back-stage of the Strand had forgotten Eve's death in three weeks. Forgotten, that is, just how horrible murder had looked. They continued to stare suspiciously into dark corners and avoid dim passageways. The chorus flirted with the cops and made nasty remarks about the lack of brains among the detectives. Beyond that, the show did go on and Johnny Orchid started to climb again, this time toward a radio show, a five year contract with Spencer Wallace and some nice offers from Hollywood.

Orchid was now billed:

DELBERT AND HIS HUMAN DUMMY JOHNNY ORCHID

The stage was turned into a jungle, with the back-drop of palms and a thatched hut. In a clearing, seated on a log, was Delbert. On his knee sat Johnny Orchid, dressed in Charlie McCarthy style with monocle in one eye and top-hat perched on his head.

Johnny Orchid didn't tell anyone that, as he sat there on that wooden knee with a wide artificial smile on his face, he was unable to speak a word.

It was true. Once mounted on his perch, his voice left him and became the property of Delbert. It was Delbert who carried the audience into fits and gales of laughter. It was Delbert who became the ventriloquist and sent his voice through Johnny Orchid's lips.

When the curtain went down, Johnny Orchid was frightened more each time of what he was doing. He had a job to do. He had to find out if his fears had been groundless. He had to go on taking advantage of the enormous sums of money that were coming his way.

PETE REYNOLDS of the *Times* became a good friend of Johnny Orchid's. After that night of death, when Reynolds had rushed back-stage to scoop every other paper in town, he had taken Johnny and Joan out for dinner. The next week it was a trip to Chinatown, and after that, Reynolds took Joan out alone because Orchid had to work out some new routine stuff for Wallace.

Not that he had any control over what would happen on the stage. Lucki-

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ly, when gags were used that Johnny Orchid didn't expect, Spencer Wallace gave him credit for working them up privately, and thought more of his ventriloquist act because each new routine brought in bigger box-office receipts.

The night Pete Reynolds took Joan to Coney Islands, Johnny Orchid worked late in his dressing room. It was close to midnight when he finished figuring out how much more money he'd need to buy the laboratory outfit he wanted to take back to Haiti, with enough left over for a honeymoon in Bermuda.

He thought he heard a slight sound below on the main floor, but as Philip Newton made the rounds every hour, he credited the sound to him. Then he heard Pete Reynolds shout hoarsely. Reynolds was supposed to have taken Joan straight home. Why had he come back to the theatre?

Orchid was on his feet, going down the iron steps as fast as he could without falling headlong into the darkness. Reynolds hadn't spoken. Instead, his shout was an expression of sudden fear and an urgent plea for help. Orchid could hear the scuffling in the darkness, then Phillip Newton's flashlight came on, swept across the floor of the stage and stopped on the sprawled figure of a man.

Orchid reached Reynold's side and fell to his knees, finding the man's pulse. He was alive. He shouted to Newton to bring water. Newton came back and Johnny had Reynolds' head on his lap. He reached for the tin cup of water and bathed Reynold's forehead.

"He gonna be all right?" Newton asked in a low voice.

The place was silent and his words carried across the empty stage and died against heavy curtains.

"I think so," Johnny said. He listened to Reynolds' quiet breathing, and saw the man's eyes open slowly.

"Johnny, for God's sake, what was it?"

Orchid shook his head.

"I went through here ten minutes ago," Newton said. "There wasn't anybody."

"Why did you come back here?" Orchid asked. "Is Joan all right?"

Reynolds struggled up on one elbow.

"All right?" He looked puzzled. "Of course! I took her home. I came back here to talk with you, Johnny. Took a chance on catching you before you left."

Phillip Newton was nodding.

"I let him in," he said. "Then I was sitting out there by the door. I heard him shout and I came in. Darned if I could see anyone . . ."

"There was *someone* in here all right," Reynolds said. He stood up, rubbing his neck. Purple marks were coming out under his chin and on the back of his neck. "Someone jumped me as I reached the stairs. Strongest hands I ever felt. They were like iron."

"Or wood," Johnny was thinking.

THEY stood there, the three of them, outlined by a single lamp over the stairs. The floor in front of them was still bright with the spot of Newton's light.

"What happened sort of knocks my speech all to pieces," Reynolds said, staring hard at Johnny Orchid.

"I suppose we ought to call the police," Johnny said, "They'll want to look around.

Newton seemed to jerk himself back to reality.

"There's a plainclothes man who's been standing in front of the theatre every night since the murder," he said. "I'll call him."

He shuffled out, leaving only the

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single bulb to light their faces. Pete Reynolds looked ill at ease. He still held a hand tenderly on his neck.

"Joan and I went to Coney Island," he said.

"I know. She said she needed something to get her mind off what happened. I'm sorry I couldn't have gone along."

Reynolds shifted his feet noisily on the floor. He stared down at them.

"Maybe it's just as well you didn't," he said.

Johnny Orchid's face looked suddenly bleak.

"I don't get it," he said. He was afraid he *did* get it, but he didn't want to say anything, yet.

"Well—" Reynolds stammered. "Joan and I have been out a lot lately. I wasn't trying to pull any funny stuff on you, Johnny. Joan has been a pretty good pal."

"Uhhuh," Orchid said in a tight voice. "Go on."

Footsteps sounded inside the stage door and voices drifted closer to them. Newton was talking excitedly to someone.

"Joan and I are going to get married," Reynolds blurted out. "Joan thinks she made a mistake. She wanted me to tell you . . ."

Whaam!

Johnny Orchid wasn't sure just how it happened. Somehow his fist shot out without his bidding and cracked against bone. He stood there, legs apart, eyes blinded, blinking down at the inert form at his feet. Then someone jerked his arms behind him and was talking tersely in his ear.

"Wise guy, huh? Trying to get him the second time, before we got here to stop you."

HE WAS fighting then, trying to break away. The flashlight was on his face, blinding him. He cursed and fought like a madman. He wasn't sorry he had hit Reynolds. He hated him. Hated Joan. He felt as though something very valuable and precious had suddenly gone to pieces before his eyes.

Dumbly, he knew that it was the plainclothes man who was holding him. The cop who had stood out front for three weeks, waiting for a murderer to come back. Still, he couldn't control his own voice. Didn't want to control it.

"He stole my girl!" he shouted. "The dirty—"

"Shut up."

His arm was twisted upward violently. "Shut up or I'll break your arm."

The pressure was worse. Then one arm was free for a second and he pivoted trying to land a blow. Something came down on his head with the force of a lightning-bolt. He knew for an instant why the arm had been free. The cop had reached for his sap. Johnny Orchid sank down to the floor feeling sick, feeling all washed up inside and sick of everything and everyone in the world.

"Joan and I are going to be married."

He could hear those words again, seeping in through a world of blackness.

"Joan thinks she made a mistake. She wanted me to tell—"

IT WAS curtain time. Johnny Orchid came down from his room slowly, hating to face Joan Leland, hating to go on after what had happened. He had been released from police headquarters, but they hadn't fooled Orchid. He was being watched now. Watched every minute, until such time as definite evidence could be found against him. He hadn't seen Reynolds since last night. Some time after Orchid was taken in, Reynolds had called,

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refused to prefer charges, and the police had let Orchid go home. Now, ready to go on with the act, he felt crushed and lost inside.

Joan Leland was walking toward the bottom of the stairs. Halfway down he paused, watching her head as it bobbed upward toward him. Then, grimly, he went toward her, his hand clutching the rail tightly. They passed and Joan's face was very pale. He thought he could see tears streaked on her cheeks. He didn't look up as he reached the stage. He could feel her staring down at him from above. He didn't trust himself to look up at her.

He strode across the room to Delbert's box. Even before he got there he knew something was wrong. The lock was twisted and broken.

He tried to show no concern, hoping that Joan was no longer on the balcony above. He opened the box slightly, stared inside.

Delbert was gone.

He closed the lid quickly, hooked the lock in place and wandered away. Out of sight among the curtains, he stopped. It was possible that the dummy might have broken out, if it were capable of moving of its own free will. He already believed that Delbert could move by himself. Phillip Newton had proven that by watching the box night and day, only to find Delbert's position changed.

What about the act?

He couldn't go on. He had to locate the dummy.

He went through the door that led into the theatre proper and up the aisle toward Spencer's suite at the front of the building. Spencer looked up and smiled as he came in.

"I understand they've been pretty hard on you at police headquarters, Orchid," he said pleasantly. "Don't let it worry you. This murder business is bad. Everyone has to be willing to do his bit to clear it up."

Orchid nodded.

"Look here, Spencer." He tried to sound angry and shocked. "Someone has stolen my dummy. The lock has been broken on the box and the dummy has been removed."

Spencer whistled.

"Good Lord," he said and stood up, dropping his pen on the desk. "It would take three men to lift the thing."

Orchid opened the door.

"Take a look for yourself," he said.

TOGETHER, they reached the box and Spencer examined the broken lock and the interior. He arose, his forehead wrinkled, brushed his trousers and sighed.

"I'll put some men on the trail right away," he said.

"That doesn't solve the problem of getting a dummy for your act."

Orchid wanted to get away. To search for Delbert, before—

"Suppose we cancel that contract," he suggested. I'm all washed up anyhow. The papers will link me with the murder. You won't make a dime on me from now on. I'm ready to quit."

Ready to quit. He was ready to go as far from New York as he could get. To leave everyone and everything that reminded him of Joan Leland.

"Take it easy." Wallace sat down on the box and lighted a cigarette. "We can get a small dummy for you to use until we locate the other one. The contract stays as is. You're going to do all right."

That's the way it ended. A standard-sized dummy was found and the act was ready.

A half hour had passed since Wallace had refused to release him. Orchid wanted to leave the theatre to search for Delbert. He made sure the dummy

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wasn't in any of the dressing rooms. He searched every empty room, and gave up only when the orchestra started to introduce his own act.

He hurried downstairs, carrying the small dummy under his arm. He started toward the stage, then stopped short. Something was moving in the shadows near Delbert's box. He ran toward it and found only the closed box.

Had he really seen something move in the shadows?

He opened the lid hurriedly.

Delbert lay peacefully in the box.

THE spotlight was in his eyes, blinding him. He sat on Delbert's knee and suddenly his voice was gone—transferred to the huge dummy. The act went along evenly. The blood in Johnny Orchid's veins was like ice water. Once more he was listening to his own voice, and knowing that he could not say a word. Once more he let Delbert speak for them both, and wondered what p o w e r was in the wooden figure that could snatch his voice away and speak freely without throat, brains, or soul.

This experience had become common to Orchid. He had argued with himself many times, sure that if he continued to go on the stage and allow the dummy to speak as it did, some disaster would occur. It was reasonable to believe that if Delbert could speak, he might mimic humans in other, more dangerous ways.

The dummy was making a big hit tonight. Delbert's wit was sharp and he seemed aware of the terror he had aroused in Johnny Orchid's heart.

"What would you do, Johnny," Delbert asked, "If I were to leave here one of these days and let you make a living without me?"

Chuckles from below.

"I'd have to get along somehow," Orchid's voice came, small, very low.

"Without me to carry the act," Delbert said, "you'd find yourself sitting on the floor without a contract to read on lonely nights."

It went on like that, with Delbert throwing out deliberate, wicked feelers to drive Orchid closer to madness.

"I went out for a walk this evening," Delbert said, and the audience howled at the thought of the huge wooden god strolling along the street. "I had to see a man," Delbert said.

Orchid's mind was working furiously. Was Delbert trying to confuse him or was the dummy trying to give him an inkling of what had happened?

THE show was over and Orchid left Delbert in the care of the stage hands. He went to his room. His door was ajar. He went in to find Joan Leland staring at him, her back to his dressing table, eyes filled with tears.

"Johnny," she said in a small voice.

"I'm sorry." He turned around and started to close the door behind him.

"Please, Johnny. I want to talk to you."

His heart was beating furiously. He felt cold and tired inside.

"I don't see what there is to talk about," he said.

She came toward him hesitantly.

"Just before the show, I was with Mr. Reynolds."

Orchid swore softly.

"It's *Mr.* Reynolds now, is it?"

She nodded, quite close to him now. Her eyes were red and swollen.

"It always was," she said. "Johnny, I didn't send him here that night. He asked me to marry him. I told him I wasn't sure. He's been a grand person. Somehow he misunderstood me. Tonight when he said he had told you I didn't love you—that I was going to marry him, I was so angry I could have

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killed him. Don't you see? I wasn't sure of anything, after losing my sister and being mixed up in this terrible mess. I'm sure now, Johnny. I'm sure that I was a fool. That I couldn't love anyone but you."

She was desperately appealing at that moment. Johnny knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to sweep her slim fragrant figure into his arms and cover her lips with kisses.

Still, something made it all sound wrong. He was sick. Sick of himself —everything.

"I'm damned if I know what to say," he said. "I—I'd like to work it out in my own mind. When Reynolds came to me, I saw red. I'm sorry I hit him. Maybe he wasn't to blame after all. I don't know. I've got to think."

He went out, leaving her there alone. He went downstairs slowly. Phillip Newton was coming in from the stage door. He looked haggard.

"Mr. Orchid."

Johnny waited for him to cross the room.

"They just called the theater to contact Mr. Spencer. He has left and I told them so. The police said if you were here to tell you to stay until you hear from them. There's been more trouble, terrible trouble."

Johnny Orchid waited.

"Mr. Reynolds has been murdered," Newton said. "Strangled in his apartment, about two hours ago."

It took a while for the message to sink in. It couldn't make much difference now, Johnny Orchid thought.

"Thanks for telling me."

Head down, he wandered into the darkness of the deserted stage. Something about Delbert's box seemed to draw him. He went toward it slowly, shuddering at the thoughts that filled his mind. Murdered two hours ago. Delbert had been gone at the time Reynolds was murdered.

He lifted the lid slowly. He heard Newton's soft footsteps behind him. The watchman's flashlight went on, outlining the silent wooden figure in the box.

"Funny about that dummy being gone, wasn't it, Mr. Orchid?"

Newton's voice startled him.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, it was."

The circle of light moved slowly over the dummy and halted on the huge, wooden hands. It didn't move away, and neither of them spoke.

The light made the hands look alive, almost human. On the fingers of the right hand were small dark blotches. Blotches that might be human blood.

INSPECTOR Rand McFall sat easily back in the chair, its front legs tilted, the back against Johnny Orchid's dressing table. The small room was filled with people. Spencer Wallace stood by the window, staring down absently at the crowd gathering for the afternoon matinee. Johnny Orchid, Joan Leland, Joan's brother and two police officers made up the remainder of the group.

Joan's face was made up carefully, no trace remaining of the tears Johnny Orchid had seen last night. Her brother sat close to her, his arm on her shoulder.

Inspector Rand McFall was a large man. Large smile and big paunch. He wasn't a man who p u s h e d people around. His voice was soft, almost gentle, but edged with the bite of hard steel.

"I don't think there is much mystery here," he said finally. "You, Mr. Orchid, and Miss Leland were in love. Miss Leland admits that Reynolds asked her to marry him. I have two witnesses who saw Orchid attack Reynolds. You admitted, Orchid that you

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hated him. Last night you caused confusion by a silly story about your dummy being missing. You wanted to get away from here and stay out of sight. Afterward, you conveniently found the dummy and the show went on. I believe that you, and perhaps Miss Leland also, visited Reynolds' apartment and murdered him."

Joan remained silent. Johnny Orchid's face was expressionless. How could he tell them that Delbert was a murderer? They would arrest him at once as a mental case.

"How do you explain the death of Joan's sister?" he asked. "Why would I want her out of the way?'

McFall shrugged.

"We'll work on that angle later," he said. "Maybe she played around with you, and Miss Leland here," he nodded toward Joan, "took care of her and Reynolds both."

The room was filled with sound suddenly. Joan was crying, her face pressed to her brother's chest. Johnny Orchid was calling McFall seven kinds of a damned fool and the police were pushing Johnny around and trying to quiet him. The door opened and Phillip Newton came in. He carried a gun. It was a big revolver with the business end making wavery, frightening motions toward everyone in the room.

THE place was suddenly hushed again. Orchid was too startled to go on resisting the uniformed men. Joan was silent, turned to face Newton, leaning back in her brother's arms. McFall stood up slowly, his eyes gone hard.

"What the hell are you waving that thing for?" he asked.

It didn't seem to frighten Newton.

"I'm the murderer," he said, his voice filled with drama.

Spencer Wallace, still at the window, swore softly.

"You wouldn't kill a fly," he said. "Cut out the theatrical stunt."

McFall didn't seem to be so sure.

"Look here," he said, "put down that gun and say what's on your mind. You can't get away with another killing."

Newton's gun hand was steadier.

"I can if anyone tries to get me," he said. "You're trying to railroad Johnny on two murders he didn't commit. Johnny and Joan are all right. I hated Reynolds and I didn't like Joan's sister. That's all the reason I needed for killing them. You got to accept my written confession for being responsible for the whole business."

McFall laughed suddenly.

"So that's the act, is it? Night watchman confesses all in a moment of weakness."

He walked slowly toward Newton.

"Stay away from me or I'll shoot."

McFall kept on moving, slowly, his eyes on Newton's face.

"No you won't," he said. "Give me that gun before you hurt someone with it."

He reached out and took the weapon from Newton's hands. The old man's head bowed suddenly and he started to sob.

"I thought you'd believe me," he said. "Johnny and Joan ain't to blame. You'd never believe me if I told you who the murderer was. I thought. . ."

"You thought you could play hero," McFall said evenly. Well, you can't, and you can't confuse us by naming another murderer. We don't have any faith in you. Now go back downstairs and to work. Next time you feel like playing murderer, go out and do something to get punished for."

He waited until Newton was outside, then closed the door softly. He went back to his chair and sat down. He stared hard at Johnny Orchid, then at

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Joan Leland. There was a faint, sardonic smile on his lips.

"Good God," he breathed. "Melodramatics seem to be *the* thing around here. Can't you people come down to earth and act like human—"

A thin, piercing scream echoed and re-echoed through the vast stage below them. McFall was across the room like a cat, with the door thrown wide open. The officers were behind him, staring down the long flight of iron stairs. McFall turned toward the room again, his eyes narrow, lips white.

"Here is one murder you two *didn't* commit," he said and started down on the double. One of the cops came back into the room. The other followed McFall.

"Hell," the cop said and wiped his forehead. "What goes in this joint?"

JOHNNY ORCHID went for the door. The cop tried to stop him and Orchid slugged him from way down. The cop's chin went back with a snap and he sank to the floor.

Joan was through the door behind Johnny Orchid.

"Johnnie, don't go down."

He didn't even hear her.

Johnny was sure of his murderer now. Phillip Newton had been alone. Delbert was down there. No one else. The stage door was locked when Newton was away from it.

He heard Inspector McFall swear, then two gun shots came in quick succession. He was near the bottom of the stairs now, and could see McFall standing with legs far apart, emptying his gun into the darkness toward Delbert's box. The cop who had followed McFall was lying on the floor, out cold.

Orchid ignored the gun. He went toward the box, running fast. It was dark among the curtains. He heard McFall shout a warning, then a huge, wooden arm swept out and clutched his waist. Johnny Orchid didn't cry out. He was whirled around high in the air, held tightly.

"Hold your fire," he heard McFall shout. "You'll hit Orchid."

Then it was quiet again, save for groans of the cop who was lying on the floor, with a broken arm.

Johnny Orchid's voice was gone.

He knew he was in Delbert's arms. He waited as Delbert sat down slowly on the box and placed Johnny Orchid tenderly on his knee.

Johnny tried not to look up. He didn't want to see the satanic, ugly face. He had to look.

Delbert was alive all right. His round, red eyes blinked slowly. Hot breath came from the thick wooden lips. His arm around Johnny was tight, yet not too tight.

It was like being on a small stage. A darkened, prison-like stage, with a small audience made up of McFall, Joan and the others. They stood about ten feet away, all showing various stages of horror and surprise.

Johnny Orchid wanted to shout—to warn them away. His lips were silent. He couldn't make a sound.

Then Delbert spoke.

"I'm glad you came down, Johnny," Delbert said. "I'm ready to leave and I was coming up after you."

Johnny Orchid waited, unable to move, unable to speak.

"The old man was a fool, Johnny," Delbert said. "He tried to take credit for what I did. I hate people who steal credit, Johnny. I killed the old man."

Killer. Killer three times. Wooden hands that strangled Joan's sister, strangled Reynolds, crushed the life from poor old Philip Newton.

Then Johnny's voice spoke, but it wasn't Johnny Orchid who said:

"But why, Delbert? Why did you

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kill?"

Delbert's voice sighed.

"You shouldn't have brought me here, Johnny," it said. "In Haiti I was powerful. Many centuries ago, powerful men of voodoo tried to give me a heart, a soul. Tried to make me live. I was too old then, too dried out and stiff. The heart was there, all contained in herbs and the bodies of animals. It wouldn't work, Johnny, not until you brought me where the air was cool and damp. Until you spoke to me and gave me a voice."

JOHNNY ORCHID knew that Delbert was enjoying himself. Delbert had been trained to be dramatic. Johnny had trained him.

"You threw your voice at me," Delbert said, chuckling a little as though it were a great joke. "And Johnny, it was so funny. I'll never forget the expression on your face when I actually was able to catch your voice and keep it for my own."

Orchid stared out at the small ring of people before him. McFall held his gun limply at his side. Joan wasn't frightened for herself any more. She was frightened for Johnny Orchid. He saw that in her eyes and was glad.

Then his eyes travelled beyond them, to the battered, misshapen form of Phillip Newton.

"You wonder why I killed?" Delbert asked. "Listen to me closely. You planned to return to Haiti. Haiti is my home, Johnny, and I love it very much. If you belonged to me, I could take you back and I could talk for I was alive. Perhaps in Haiti I could not move again if I grew dry and stiff. At least, I could always talk."

The huge hand released Orchid's waist and stroked his shoulder.

"You are mine, Johnny. Do you understand that? You are mine. I tried to kill that girl." The hand pointed to Joan. "I *will* kill her before we go, Johnny. The first time I killed the wrong one. My eyes were not strong yet, and I could not see well. They look alike.

"You wonder why I killed the one you call Reynolds? He was angry with you and I don't like to have people angry at Johnny. They might hurt him and steal my voice."

Delbert chuckled, and it was like the sound of huge, dry branches rubbing together in the wind.

Inside Johnny Orchid a voice kept saying:

"You've got to destroy him. You've got to destroy him before he murders Joan."

There were matches in his pocket. Perhaps he could find some way to use them, since Delbert was of wood. . . .

"Don't be angry at Delbert, Johnny," the dummy said softly. Its eyes were fixed on Joan. "We will go to Haiti, Johnny. They won't hurt us there."

DELBERT was on his feet suddenly, sending Orchid sprawling on the floor. He started to lumber across the stage toward Joan. Orchid was on his feet behind the dummy. He fumbled for the matches. He kept going, unnoticed by Delbert, a lighted match in his hand.

McFall was watching Orchid.

Delbert's eyes were on Joan now, and he saw no one else. The girl backed away slowly, her hand over her mouth. McFall was waiting, his eyes slitted.

Johnny Orchid knew they would work together. He saw it in McFall's eyes.

"Now," he shouted. "Knock him over!"

McFall must have been a good football player in his day. He made a flying tackle at Delbert's waist and it

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actually moved the dummy, making him sway for an instant before he caught his balance. At the same time the others closed in, trying to avoid the swinging arms, trying to get a hold on the giant creature.

Delbert roared with rage.

"Stay away! Stay away! I kill only the girl."

He picked them off like insects. McFall spun half a dozen yards across the room and came down on his back. He stood up, shaking his head, and came in again.

Delbert fell heavily, and McFall landed on his chest. Another cop sat on the wooden feet. Johnny Orchid applied the flaming match to the wood. With a scream of pain and hate, Delbert rolled them over and sent the cop against the wall, head first. His great arm swung around and caught Johnny Orchid around the waist. He sent Orchid spinning through the air into the heavy back-drop curtains. Orchid hit hard. The wind went out of him and he lay still, the match still burning, close to the heavy curtains.

Joan screamed a warning to McFall, and the flame caught and roared upward. Even Delbert stood still for a moment, his dull, fascinated eyes on the fire. Then McFall got too close to him, trying to reach Orchid's side. Delbert smacked McFall down to the floor and went after Joan. The girl started across the room, up the stairs toward the dressing-rooms. McFall was on his feet again, groggy.

"Send in an alarm!" he shouted to one of his men. He had his guns out again, firing into Delbert's back. The flame was roaring up now, lighting the dim, high places behind the curtains. Orchid rolled over with his arm over his face. He got to his feet groggily. He saw Joan, high up in the wings, trying to reach her room. McFall was up there too. He had worked himself to a spot on the stairs, a bare ten feet below Delbert, and was pumping lead into the dummy's back. Delbert stood there, staring first at the girl, then down at McFall, wondering which one he should destroy first.

ON THE far side of the stage was a duplicate flight of stairs. Orchid staggered toward them, then up, holding the rail with both hands, trying to find a breath of air in the flaming hell.

Over the stage itself, a steel grillwork stretched from side to side. Flames, still a long way below the catwalk, sent up a heat that was unbearable. Orchid grasped a length of rope, dragging it after him as he ran out on the catwalk. Across from where he stood, Delbert was once more lumbering after the girl. She had gained the questionable safety of her room.

Orchid stretched the rope from one side of the cat-walk to the other. It was barely a foot above the steel supports. He ran the remainder of the distance across, facing Delbert on the landing.

The door to Joan's room crashed in. McFall was laying across the steps below, his body bent backward in an arc. Men didn't bend that way, alive.

"Delbert!" Johnny Orchid shouted. "Come on! We've got to get out of here!"

Delbert turned toward him.

"First I kill the girl, Johnny," he said. "Then I come, Johnny."

"I can't wait," Johnny shouted. "The firemen are coming. We've got to get across the stage and out the other way before they come."

Delbert stared down. Men were streaming in through the stage door. Water was already playing on the flaming curtains.

"Come on," Orchid cried. He started to run back across the cat-walk over

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the stage. He didn't look back. He could hear Delbert lumbering after him. The smoke was thick, almost impossible to face. He took a deep breath and plunged in.

He knew where the rope was tied, and cleared it easily. He heard the cat-walk rumble under Delbert's tread.

"J o h n n y," Delbert was calling. "We're safe. We'll go—"

THUD!

The voice was cut short as the vast wooden form hit hard, vibrating the cat-walk. Then a fearful howl came from the open space below the cat-walk as something struck, crashing loudly on the stage below.

Orchid stopped running now. The smoke was rolling up around him, but he didn't care. Joan was safe, and this time he was sure he had got his murderer.

Then he saw Joan coming toward him across the cat-walk. The smoke was clearing and men, below, were working with water and their axes. Below him, in the center of the stage, lay a charred, blackened log. It was split down the center and burned black from end to end.

Delbert. . . .

Johnny Orchid saw the look in Joan's eyes as she reached him. He didn't need his voice now. He didn't have to say a word. It was all written there on Joan's face.

LIEF THE LUCKY

By SANDY MILLER

Here Is The Fantastic Story of Lief Eriksson

ON a rock on the shore of Rhode Island, washed by the continual pounding of the rough sea waves, are the crudely carved letters:

"Lief Eriksson
MI
Vinland"

That inscription has caused many a wrinkle in many a scientific brow, and after much conjecture has been regarded as a forgery. Puzzling? Yes. For it is a written statement of the fact that a party of bold Norsemen set foot on the American continent fully three hundred years before Christopher Columbus. Other evidences of their visit have been found, and history has bestowed due credit on these men of the North. But the inscription still is a subject for argument.

It is doubtful whether Lief or any other in his party could write. Some of the Runic letters used are such as were scarcely known to the Norway of his time. And had there been a North man who could write, the name would have read "Liefr Eiriksson"; he would not have used the Roman dating "MI."

One plausible explanation has been offered which makes Lief's foster father, Tyrker, the inscriber. Tyrker was a German, a foreigner among the Northmen, perhaps one who had learned writing in his own land and Runic later in life, using the latter with a barbarous freedom that mutilated Norse construction.

The true events surrounding the life of Lief Eriksson and the other men with whom he made that adventurous voyage must necessarily remain obscure. There are no written records to examine, and but a few objects remain that give proof that they reached these western shores. All the facts surrounding the venture have been fitted together from the fragments of legend and song which have been handed down through the centuries. They make a pretty convincing tale, one which can be believed and accepted as the truth despite the very unscientific source.

By the tenth Christian century the Northmen of Scandinavia had definitely established themselves as the great sea-faring folk of Europe. Their ships were stout and strong, made of hard woods and well constructed. Their crews were men from a bitter and infertile land where it was scarcely possible to gain a living from the soil. Surrounded by the sea, they turned to it for adventure and sustenance. The Norsemen were the first to sail far from the coasts, to steer by the stars, by wind-direction, by the finding of birds, across great open spaces of water. Without the aid of the most primitive compass they had voyaged to Iceland, to Greenland, to Spitzbergen, and to Novaya Zemlya.

Lief's father, Eric Raude, with a group of strong and skillful seamen, had been the first Europeans to land on Greenland. Sustained on the bountiful results of their whale-hunting and fishing expeditions, a small settlement was built. Cattle was pastured in that heretofore barren land.

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Seeds were sowed and crops harvested. In these surroundings Lief, his two brothers, and his sister were born. After braving the hardship and comparative isolation on the Greenland shore, Eric took his family back to his home in Iceland.

There he spread the tale of the wonderful life to be found in Greenland. In the year 999 when Lief was little over twenty years of age, he set sail on his own ship for the coast of Norway. Lief was a typical Norseman, tall and burly, powerfully built. His mental content was a strange mixture of hunting and whaling lore, of warfare, of folk legends of the gods of war and the sea, and a very hazy view of the geography of the northern waters. In his heart was a young man's hope for adventure in the daring life of piracy on the seas.

Norway held many wonders for him. Christianity was one of them. Olaf Tryggvason, that unique barbarian who had become such a curiously fanatic Christian, ruled Norway at the time. At the court there were priests from the South, from the Baltic, and from Germany. With these men and the traders and missionaries, Lief spoke of the many lands he had seen, and they in turn fashioned a web of geographical fancies in his brain far beyond all his former visions. When he set sail again for Greenland he took with him a priest to convert the Greenland heathen. The next winter new sounds were heard in those sub-arctic wastes—the chanting of mass and hymn singing filled the frosty air.

In 1002 a ship driven violently from its course by storm winds and stranded in fogs for a time sighted land where no land should have been. It was Spring and the forest which hugged that foreign shore-line was a brilliant green. The excitement of the Northmen grew as they steered the ship nearer. But their captain refused to make a landing and the ship sailed northeast until the land vanished from sight. Once again—days later—they saw more land, and once again their captain refused to allow the men to leave the ship.

When they reached their home with the tale, Lief Eriksson was aroused. He hurried to prepare his ship for the voyage. It was summer before his crew of thirty-five men and one woman was assembled. That woman was the slave, Hekja, wife of Haki, a crew member. Lief's foster-father was in the group. Eric was also called upon to take part in the glorious expedition. He was still remembered as a great explorer. But, unfortunately, on the way to the ship Eric fell from his horse breaking several ribs, and making it impossible for him to accompany his son.

The great square sail was hoisted and the ship pulled away from the Greenland coast. A good wind from the southwest carried them in two or three days to the great current that sweeps down toward Labrador. At last there appeared a long stretch of coastland with great icy mountains reaching toward the sky. A landing was made, but Lief and his companions regarded the place without enthusiasm. It was a bleak and barren land. They christened it Helluland, The Land of the Flat Stones, and set sail once more.

They continued down the coast viewing the sparkling white sand of the Nova Scotia beach. Putting ashore in a boat they found water and wood in abundance. After a brief period of exploration, they re-embarked and continued south. At intervals of about two or three days they would put in toward shore and explore the land. It opened richer and more beautiful wonders to their eyes the farther south they moved.

At Rhode Island the ship was anchored and the entire crew made for shore. A few shelters were erected, and the men spent their time fishing for salmon and exploring the mainland. They remained there for the entire winter, and it is supposed that Tyrker then inscribed the rock. Filled with pride for the achievements of his foster-son and having plenty of time on his hands, that energetic little German busied himself with carving out that enigmatic misspelling.

From story and song we can assemble the facts which tell of one of Tyrker's adventures. It seems that in the middle of the winter season an illness came to some of the men. In the midst of this misfortune, Tyrker disappeared.

Lief was troubled the first day of his disappearance and even more the next. On the third day he organized a searching party and rowed across to the mainland. They searched far from the beach haunts of their exploration, and finally, deep in the woods, came upon the German sitting on the ground in a strange condition. First he spoke for a long time in German, and rolled his eyes and twisted his mouth; but they could not make out what he said. After a while he said in Norse: "I did not go much further, and yet I have a new discovery to tell of; I have found grapes and vines."

His condition was that of intoxication. It makes an amusing picture when you try to fill it out in your mind, in that silent North American forest the armed Norsemen surrounding and staring at the drunken little German babbling of his grapes and the secret brewing of them which (there can be little doubt) he carried on through many weeks. He kept the secret no longer.

Lief seems to have seen the event as the end of his troubles. He resolved to fill the ship with a cargo of pressed grapes both as a commercial proposition and as proof to the people of Greenland of the quality of the land he had found. When spring came, the Norsemen left these shores.

Returning home Lief was dubbed "Lief the Lucky." But he considered his later fortune very unlucky for he was made ruler of the settlement in Greenland and had to settle down to the mundane tasks of settling disputes, measuring crops, planning the shearing of sheep, the collecting of driftwood, the rearing of churches, instead of sailing the seas free and unhampered in quest of the wonderlands he had barely touched.

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GIRDLES FOR BATTLESHIPS

By GALE STEVENS

IT WAS November 19, 1939, and the Dutch merchant ship, the Simon Bolivar, was navigating peacefully in the waters off the east coast of England. Suddenly there was a tremendous explosion which seemed to come from beneath the ship. The entire steel bottom of the vessel was split, and within a terrifying few moments it sank, taking to a watery grave much cargo and many men. Thus began the strange story of one of Germany's most insidious "secret weapons" and its subsequent neutralization by the British.

The sinking of the Simon Bolivar was on Saturday and the following day saw many more such tragic events. By Monday ten ships had gone down with a loss of two hundred lives. It seemed almost mysterious that these things could happen in closely patrolled coastal water where mine sweepers operated at frequent intervals and submarine detection was at a maximum.

A pair of British lookouts reported the first evidence to throw light on the mystery. They noted that the night before several of the sinkings German airplanes were seen hovering over the water within sight of the English shore. From these ships they had seen strange black objects drop which floated down to the water's surface and then disappeared from view. One of these odd cylindrical shaped objects was sighted resting on a sand bank opposite the Essex seashore town of Shoeburyness.

The device was a metal cylinder eight feet long and two feet in diameter shaped somewhat like a torpedo. But there was no steering gear of propelling mechanism which torpedoes generally carry nor was there any chain, cable, or moving gear such as is attached to the usual buoy type of mine. Suspecting that it might be a magnetic devise, the experts of the British Admiralty's mine experimental department divested their pockets of keys, tools, and other things of steel or iron before approaching the contraption. Then they made careful measurements of its exterior, noting joints and seams, and they prepared special tools of non-magnetic materials to use in dismembering the mine.

It was Lieutenant Commander John G. D. Ouvry who volunteered to open the unknown machine and examine it. Fully aware that the device could be set to explode upon opening, Commander Ouvry nevertheless went fearlessly ahead, knowing that this was the only way the ever-increasing number of sinkings could be halted. He explained what he intended to do to his staff so that they should have some knowledge of what not to do in the event that he was blown up.

Ouvry first removed a small fitting which he assumed to be a detonator. Throughout the day he and his assistant worked at the outer casing until they finally removed it, together with another fitting which to their very great surprise was a second detonator. They decided that now the mine was harmless and sent it to Portsmouth for further study.

The casing was a light metal, resembling duralumin. The charge, about 650 pounds, of high explosive, was carried in the forward part. Just back of it was a compartment containing the firing mechanism, whose control was a magnetic needle. Finally there was evidence that the construction originally included a rear compartment in which was carried a parachute. The total weight was around 1,200 pounds. As the mine dropped from the mine-sowing airplane the sides of its rear compartment opened, the parachute unfolded and the load was eased down to the sea. On reaching the water it sank to the bottom, while an automatic device freed the parachute and another controlled by water pressure set the firing mechanism. As soon as it was thus rendered "alive" the mine became sensitive to any iron presence within the range of its magnetic influence.

The range was about thirty feet. This was the reason that the Germans used the Thames Estuary, the mouth of the Humber, and other shore waters of forty feet depth or less. Most of the steel ships, riding at least ten feet under water, would affect the magnetic needle; the swing of the needle would close an electric circuit to the detonator, and this in turn would set off the charge.

The device was designed perfectly for its deadly purpose. Because it struck from below, the massive impact would split the ship bottom in two, making it almost inevitably a total loss, for little could be saved before it would sink. Moreover, lying out of reach of mine weepers it was almost impossible to eliminate.

However, the British scientists set to work to counteract this deadly weapon. They reasoned thus: the fundamental basis for the operation of the mine was magnetism. The hull of a ship is feebly magnetized by the Earth's magnetic field, as are all steel objects. Is becomes virtually a magnet in itself, with one of its ends serving as the north-seeking pole, the other as the south-seeking pole, which end is which depending on the ship's position with reference to the direction of the Earth's magnetic field. Also the steel needle poised in the mine down on the sea bed is a magnet. It is known that when one magnet is brought near another, like poles repel, opposite poles attract; hence the needle in the mine swings either toward the ship or away from it. In whichever direction it moves, the device is so arranged that it forms a contact and closes an electric circuit which sets off the explosive.

Now any object which did not act as a magnet

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would have no effect on the needle. If they could take the ship out of the magnet class it would completely neutralize the mine.

How did they do this? Well, they wound a coil or wire around the hull of the ship and sent through it a suitable current of electricity. They proportioned the strength of the current to induce a magnetic field of opposite polarity of exactly the same strength as the field imposed by the Earth. The steel ship was thus enclosed by a protective girdle (it is called a degaussing girdle), and completely denuded of its magnetism!

Thus the British scientists ingeniously utilized the same principle on which the magnetic mine was based to overcome its effect. Science again came to the aid of the United Nations.

PLYWOOD IN SCIENCE

By C. S. RICE

A NEW basic material that saves vital aluminum, offers new hope for speedier production, results in faster airplanes, and possesses other superior qualities is none other than plywood.

Plywood is a sandwich of glue and wood, now used in making chicken coops, luggage, kitchen cabinets and scores of other products. The plywood airplane is not a dream. The Italians were constructing at least four bombers wholly or nearly of plywood. Russia's most popular fighter-plane, the MIG-3, has an all-plywood tail and a wing made largely of that material.

We are ahead of and behind Europe in understanding plywood as an aircraft material. We are ahead in technique. We are behind in experience and open-mindedness.

During World War I all combat planes were made mainly of wood or plywood with fabric or plywood covering and metal fittings. The same "stick and wire" construction was nearly universal through the '20's. In 1930, however, it all but disappeared in the United States except in racing planes and light private planes. Casein from milk nor blood-aluminum glue from slaughtered cattle, the two strongest bonding agents then known, was completely waterproof or fungusproof. Even in the heat and rain of the Netherlands East Indies there were wooden Fokkers more than 15 years old. But some of them in the same area sprouted mushroomlike growths inside their wings.

In 1930, the famous Alpha made by John Northrop set the stage for a wholly new type of all-metal planes. Soon came the big all-metal transports, and afterwards the Flying Fortresses and fast all-metal pursuits.

This metal revolution shook Europe, but it was never a real revolution because Europe lacked our aluminum resources. Therefore, it continued to build plywood planes of all types, from trainers to transports. Synthetic resins were discovered which are waterproof and fungusproof, heat and cold resistant.

In Europe flat plywood sheets are commonly formed into the curves necessary for streamlining by soaking them with steam and bending them. However, afterwards the wood tends to straighten out again, especially under humid conditions. In 1927 Lockheed produced its Vega model with a fuselage of molded plywood.

No matter what the fabricating process, plywood has many points in its favor. It fails under rapid continued vibration much less readily than duralumin. It does not corrode—an advantage in seaplanes, nor does it splinter in a crash. A bullet passing through it leaves a clean hole no bigger than the projectile, whereas duralumin "flowers" out with jagged edges. Plywood is considerably more flameproof than dural of equal weight. It can be repaired quickly and easily, with glue and a plywood patch. As Tony Fokker used to say, "Any cigar-box maker can repair my ship."

More important, it cuts down "aerodynamic drag," that bugaboo for designers of high-speed aircraft. Plywood does not require rivets or overlaps. It can be polished to glassy smoothness. A plywood fighter would probably pick up 20 to 30 miles an hour in top speed over a metal fighter of equal horsepower.

Even more important is the fact that plywood planes can be turned out on a mass-production basis and in about half the time consumed in manufacturing a metal plane. Labor, materials and machinery are no issue. Workers are easily trained, and most of them could be women. Most operations involved can be subcontracted to furniture and piano factories.

Molded plywood is finding its way into non-aviation material as well—experimentally in army reconnaissance, vehicles, rifle stocks, lifeboats; on a production basis in skis, torpedo-boat deck housings and land-boat hulls. The future for plywood is of no consequence now. All that matters is that the war be won and plywood—in trainers, in combat ships, in other material—has a demonstrated ability to help win it.

BUY MORE WAR BONDS!

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KING OF THE DINOSAURS
(Continued from page 67)

him. Toka took in Rissa at a glance. She was clothed in a filmy blue robe over an equally sheer low-bodiced sleeping gown. He eyed her warily, but she was strangely unvengeful now. She must have heard the footsteps in the passage, noted his nervous manner of being pursued.

"Quick!" she commanded, turning and running for her room. "Follow me!"

Toka was at her heels, into her scented room. Her door shut just as the passage door banged open and angrily hurrying sandaled footsteps came into the corridor. Bewilderingly, the footsteps were not Kagi's but Kola's! Kola slammed angrily on into his own room.

Toka relaxed slightly, felt Rissa relax, tremble slightly against him. He quickly surveyed the starlit room. The two windows overlooking the side terrace were high, narrow, too narrow for a man to squeeze through. The bed had been restlessly used. Rissa's bits of iridescent day apparel gave off a shimmer here and there about the room, on the floor, on the backs of chairs, on the center table, on the dressing table with its polished black stone mirror. Toka could hear Kola striding about in his room. Rissa laid a hand on Toka's arm.

"Toka."

"Yes?"

"I'm—"

Further talk was abruptly cut by Kola's storming from his room, racing up the corridor and mouthing foul curses. He stormed into the room next to Rissa's. Toka could hear Kola throwing the furniture about in it. Kola burst out of it, strode angrily on up the corridor and into the main room.

"What have you done!" whispered Rissa to Toka. She was trembling, clutching his arm fiercely.

But Toka had his hearing strained for Kola's movements. He heard him on the side terrace now, then going back into the main room, returning violently down the corridor, to Rissa's door. His angry fist beat the door.

"Open up!" he bellowed.

Rissa pulled Toka away from the door, back beside her bed. "Under my bed!" she hissed.

Toka's eyes covered the room again. No escape. The bed was the only place of hiding. "No," he whispered. "I'll stand. Open the door."

"Toka!" pleaded Rissa in a whisper. "Don't be a fool! He's mad enough to kill you!"

Kola whaled on the door again, bellowed, "Rissa! Get up!"

"Better open the door," suggested Toka.

"You haven't even a knife!" pleaded Rissa. "Don't spoil all your chances now!"

Toka was struck by the change in Rissa, by the sincerity, the remarkableness of her last statement.

Kola's fist punished the door again. "Open this door!" he raged.

"Quick!" pleaded Rissa. "Under my bed! Please."

Toka dropped, crawled under, turned his head to watch the door. Kola's fist whaled again.

"Just a minute, Kola!" called Rissa sleepily.

TOKA could hear Rissa moving around as if getting up and dressing. He heard her go to the table, take up and uncap the stone fire holder, saw the flickering shadows and yellow light as she lit a candle on her table. Then he watched her bare feet as she went to the door and admitted her raging

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brother. He saw Kola's sandaled feet striding angrily in.

"Well, where is he?" bellowed Kola.

"Where is who?" sleepily asked Rissa.

"That pet rat of yours!" roared Kola, stomping around.

"I suppose you mean Toka," yawned Rissa.

"Where is he?" roared Kola. He flailed the floor in irritation. Showers of blue-white sparks splayed viciously.

"Oh, go on to bed and sleep it off," said Rissa.

"Sleep it off?" shouted Kola.

"Good sleeping," said Rissa. "Big Snake's gone away."

"Yeah!" ranted Kola. "And he did that too!"

"I let him," yawned Rissa.

"You let him!"

"Getting deaf?"

"I suppose you let him rob the vault too!"

Rissa hesitated ever so slightly. "The vault?"

"Getting deaf?" mocked Kola.

"How much?"

"Fifty packs of berries!"

Rissa was again unimpressed. "Sure you didn't eat them?"

"Don't you think I know how many I eat?"

"Sometimes I wonder."

Kola was silent a thoughtful moment. Toka could see the spraddled feet pointed away, toward Rissa, who was beside the table.

"Say," rasped Kola, "are you covering up for that rat?"

Rissa tinkled in high amusement.

"You," reminded Kola, "were supposed to keep your pet rat on the straight!"

"No one else," mocked Rissa, "could have stolen the berries?"

Kola did not reply.

"Your dear Kagi," said Rissa, "is *so* honest!"

"Cut the stalling!"

"Well, Toka's not in here!" flared Rissa in irritation. "So get out!"

Toka saw Kola's feet and ankles give to a slow turning of his body, a slow searching turning around the room, toward the bed, and stop. Toka held his breath, readied himself.

"What," rasped Kola, "is under your bed?"

Rissa gave an amused laugh. "The floor—I suppose."

But Toka saw Kola's battle-ax flashing, and the bed crashed away.

"Some floor!" roared Kola. His face was maniacally twisting and fiendishly shadowed in the yellow candle light.

TOKA rolled away, was up and dodging away from the charging Kola. The great battle-ax flashed, whistled viciously over Toka's ducked head. Toka flashed his fist solidly to Kola's jaw, failed to even rock the berry-strong giant. Kola's battle-ax was flashing again, hissed over Toka's head as he dived flat, sprang for Kola's ankles. Toka twisted as he dived and the battle-ax splayed sparks from the floor where he had lain that split second. Toka's hands found those thick-tendoned ankles and Kola was thrown against the table, crashed with it as Toka sprang clear of another whistling flashing of the vicious battle-ax. Toka crashed backward over a chair.

As Kola crashed, the candle that had been on the table was rolling, spluttering. But in the scant moments before the candle blacked, Toka saw Rissa behind the scrambling Kola, saw her lifting another chair, recklessly bringing it down at her brother's head, and missing. Then Toka heard Kola flailing up to his feet, tear the screaming and clawing Rissa from himself with long and quick sounds of ripping cloth.

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Toka was also on his feet in the dark, was swinging the chair over which he'd fallen, was swinging it in the direction of the charging Kola. Kola's battle-ax smashed the chair from Toka's hands. Instantly Toka dropped, rolled away to the north wall, lay still. The battle-ax was whistling viciously in search.

"Light that candle!" roared Kola, from the center of the room.

Toka's searching hand gripped on a cylindrical object, the fire holder. He tossed the holder lightly toward the other side of the room. It clattered onto the floor, against the south wall. Kola, roaring curses, immediately charged, his flailing battle-ax splaying vicious sparks from floor and wall.

Toka leaped for the door. He felt the releasing masonry. The door swung open. Toka promptly slammed it shut and dropped doubled up to the near corner of Rissa's room. Roaring curdling oaths, Kola charged the door, fumbled for the mechanism, tore open the swinging door, charged into the corridor, hesitated a second, then charged up toward the main room. Rissa's door had shut.

Toka straightened up, listening. He heard Kola charge out onto the side terrace, back in again and on out onto the main terrace of Twenty-five. Toka had a thought of concern for Rissa.

"Rissa," he whispered.

"Toka!" Her whisper was glad, anxious.

"All right?" asked Toka.

"Yes." She was instantly to him in the dark, was clinging gratefully to him. "And you?"

"Okay." He could feel on his chest that Rissa's flimsy apparel had been, if not ripped entirely away, at least badly torn.

Kola, still on Twenty-five, was a bellowing maniac. "Drummers! You filthy rats down there! Wake up! Get that drum talking! Search all Sandcliff! At once! Find Toka! Find Toka! Bring him to me! Alive! Alive! Now keep it talking!"

The great drum was hurriedly throbbing it out into the moonlit night, hysterically repeated it over and over.

"Toka!" gasped Rissa. "Quick—the passage!"

Toka was out the door, down the corridor. Rissa was with him. She was trying, not too successfully, to hold her shreds of gown together. They were at the passage door now, Toka's hand on the releasing masonry.

"The second turn! Door to Top! Fourth left floor block!" passionately directed Rissa. As the door swung open on the empty passage, she threw her arms around Toka's neck, clung completely to him a moment, her warm lips hungrily hard on his.

Toka felt himself responding more than he should. Then Rissa tore herself free, ran up the corridor to her room.

CHAPTER XXX

TOKA leaped into the passage, the door closing behind him. He was down to the first corner, peeking around it. Clear to the second turn. He ran to the second turn, peeking, listening. Clear. He shot his gaze across the turn, to the north wall, to the wall area next the west wall. There was no sign of any door. Yet there must be a door there; it must have been in there that Kagi had hidden while the irate Kola passed. Kagi might still be in there. Toka threw away the sudden thought. No, not with the frantic calling of that drum out there; Kagi would have had to get on the job immediately or risk Kola's quick suspicion and terrible wrath.

Nevertheless Toka was cautious as

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he found and moved the black square in the floor, fourth along the west wall from the north wall.

A door-size section of wall had swung swiftly back into the north wall. Tense, ready, Toka shot his eyes in and up the stairway that began three paces within, went ten steps up to a right turn. The steps were black, the walls and ceiling glowing white. Even in this Kola's idea of beauty had its way.

The stairway was clear as far as Toka could see. He stepped through the doorway and stole up the first ten steps, to a square landing. The stairway turned right, continued on up for some fifty steps. Clear. Toka bounded up, onto another square landing. A red boulder, a rough part of the south wall, would be the door to the Topland.

Toka paused a moment to orient himself, to listen. From the distances, turns and ascents, he judged this boulder door would be about fifty paces back from the high stone wall above Twenty-five and about fifty paces west of the open-faced structures used for butchering the goats and processing the by-products. Except for the goats, the Topland and buildings should be deserted. Only twice a year was there any activity, other times the goats roamed unherded, untended. And there were no children on Twenty-five, now, to play about on the Topland.

Toka ran swift hands in search of a releasing mechanism, found none. He then tested the boulder itself. It gave to slight pressure on the west hand side and easily rotated, the east side in, the west side out. By the light of the stars, Toka saw a shielding rock towering just outside. He stepped out. The boulder door stayed open. Toka touched it on the west. It again gave easily. Toka semi-revolved the boulder softly shut, then turned and surveyed his position. He was in a narrow crevice. Seemingly a part of one of the many defiles of rockiness, the towering shield of rock left a space just large enough for the boulder door to swing out.

Toka listened a moment longer. The drum was throbbing Kola's directions; the other drums on every terrace were answering, reporting. The search of Sandcliff was on. Toka could hear the hoarse shouts and commands of the searchers, the frequent shrill pleadings and protestations that made his jaw muscles knot achingly.

TOKA peered around the towering rock. The defile down to the small park was a deep shadow. Toka stole swiftly down the narrow defile, over the rocky ground of the park to the low buildings. The nearest was dark, but smelled of goats, sounded of their restlessness, their baaing and sniffing.

Toka groped his way within, past warm woolly restless bodies. He could find nothing he might use as a weapon. Evidently the building had been stripped of all equipment. Toka moved to the adjoining buildings. They, too, were gaping gouges of darkness in which goats were restless from the clamor on the terraces. But the ruthless greed of the new self-appointed elite of Sandcliff had vented its scourge on these buildings as well; these, too, were equally stripped of anything one might put to practical use as a weapon.

Toka then stole back of the buildings, began covering familiar ground. He came at last in the starlit dark into a familiar defile, black-shadowed, rising in one of the many rocky jaggednesses.

Toka had stopped many times in his coming, stopped as his sure and sensitive feet felt the cool water plants. These plants were swollen round and

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smooth with stored moisture. They were large as a man's head, and in daylight would show up as green balls dotting the Topland wherever a hardy root could put down. Toka had carefully plucked as many of these plants as he could hold in his arms, for he could follow the defile as though the starlight were sunlight.

The pass rose steeply, back up along the center of the Topland, toward a high sharp shadow against the stars. Toka wanted to hide, rest, husband his strength, sleep. That towering shadow, a familiar pinnacle, overlooked the whole Topland, the surrounding country for great distances. And it had only this one very narrow way up to itself. Too, there were many loose boulders stacked around the tiny aerie atop it, boulders to roll down this narrow way, this groove.

CHAPTER XXXI

KOLA was a raging giant in the moonlight, bellowing directions from Twenty-five. The great drum on Twenty-four frantically broadcast them. But the search was fast nearing a complete scouring of Sandcliff—and no Toka. Kola's rage mounted with each unfruitful moment. At last Kagi mounted the west stairway from Twenty-four, sauntered easily to Kola.

"Well?" roared Kola at him.

"He's not down there, Chief," reported Kagi, leaning on his battle-ax. "The boys have covered every inch."

"And why were you so late getting on the job?" raged Kola.

"Why, Chief!" protested Kagi. "I was on the job before you even hollered! I was expecting him to try something!"

"Then why didn't you stop him?"

Kagi floundered only a moment. "He—he just happened to make his move before we were ready."

Kola's lips curled, his voice was ominously charged. "Sure you weren't getting ready for something else?"

Kagi laughed easily and humorously. "Well, Chief, I have run a bit low on my female supply." As Kola remained ominous, Kagi went on in elaborate shock, "Why, Chief! You act as if you don't trust your right hand any more!"

Kola eyed Kagi another speculative moment. Kagi now appeared at ease, completely unperturbed by the intent eyeing. Kola turned away a thoughtful moment.

"Well," he rasped, "any suggestions?"

"Well, Chief," smiled Kagi, "unless he jumped, he hasn't left Sandcliff. The elevators and ladders down on One haven't been touched."

"Then where is he?" roared Kola.

"The Topland?" suggested Kagi.

Kola scowled, muttered foully.

"Oh, don't stew yourself so, Chief!" soothed Kagi. "He'll keep, up there. The only way down is straight—except over there." Kagi gestured toward the center of Twenty-five and the, supposedly, lone stairway to the Topland.

After a moment of thought, Kola grunted, smiled approval. "Okay! Call off the search and put every man on the stair and wall!"

"Right, Chief! And," laughed Kagi in anticipation, "we'll have ourselves a little roundup tomorrow—since we won't have a lottery."

"We won't have to round him up," rasped Kola. "He'll come in himself. And," added Kola in answer to Kagi's remark, "there'll be a lottery." He turned from the surprised Kagi and strode into One on Twenty-five.

Kagi turned back toward his apartment next to Kola's. He stepped to

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the balustrade long enough to bark Kola's order and hear the drum throb it out. Then he turned and sauntered on into his now slaveless apartment, the slave having been discharged for the night.

Taking up his fire holder from the table in the main room, Kagi went into the dark near room, released the tie of the goatskin drape. The drape swished into place across the doorway. Kagi found the table of the rear room, laid his ax on it. He then uncapped the fire holder, held the low flame to a candle and got a light. Kagi eyed the lower left quarter of the north wall, smiled. He listened a moment, then stepped to the wall, pressed the releasing masonry. The lower left quarter of the wall swung silently open. Kagi stood licking his lips slightly, admiring the stacks of leaf-wrapped packs, now numbering an even sixty instead of the recent ten. Kagi laughed softly, his green eyes unusually alight with interest.

"While the little lovebirds play," he muttered in glee, "a little mouse sneaks it away!"

Kagi again laughed softly, swung the vault door shut, prepared for bed. He hummed a slight tune, smiled sardonically.

CHAPTER XXXII

KOLA'S bedroom door closed behind him. He found the table, carefully laid his battle-ax on it. He groped to the table and lit two candles. He then stood spraddle-legged, fists on hips, and surveyed his room. His face worked in unsated anger. A torn leaf wrapping lay mockingly on the floor near the north wall, some of the berries the leaf had held in pack were scattered about the floor.

Kola scowled, muttered vengefully as he knelt and crawled about, gathering the scattered fruit. He covered every bit of the floor, under the table, the chairs, the lounge, his bed. Apparently satisfied that he had all the scattered berries in one huge handful, he flopped into his lounge and began eating them. There was a frown on his brow.

Sandcliff was silent, sleeping now. There was only the distant throbbing of the Big Brown, the far murmuring of the brook tumbling down to the strange Hop. There was now no sound of Big Snakes grazing; having fed, they were bedded down for their evening's sleep.

His handful of berries eaten, Kola stood up, stepped to the north wall, pressed the goat's eyes. The half of wall swung out. Kola stood eyeing his wealth, especially his stock of berries. Not further disturbed, he judged. He flexed his muscles testingly. In the yellow light from the candles, they rippled and writhed like restless reptiles under his tan skin. Kola grunted in satisfaction, reached down to the left forehoof of the goat, pressed. The half of wall sighed into place. Kola turned and stepped to the table, picked up his battle-ax, swung it, hefted it, eyed its keen blade, the broad, knobbed back. His lips curled.

Kola grunted, stooped and blew out the candles, stepped silently to his door to the corridor and swung it open. He stepped noiselessly into the corridor and stole silently along the first stretch of passage; the right wall was the back wall of keen-eared Kagi's rear room.

Kola was equally silent of step down to the second turn. He paused there, listened, then touched the floor square opening the section of wall that was the door to the stairway to the Topland. He stood at the open doorway, listening. He stepped back, and the

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door section swung silently to again.

Kola stepped to the heavy blue drapes across the doorway back of his throne. He made a small port. His gaze swept the great court, found it empty. He stepped through the drapes, silently, swiftly crossed the dais, down its steps, up an aisle that led to a closed east door directly opposite the head of the east stairway down to Twenty-three. He had the door opened a crack.

He paused, then was out onto Twenty-four, the door silently shut behind him. He was only a darker shadow that the two drummers, lying dozing near their drum, did not see. Without a sound, he was swiftly down the east stairway to Twenty-three. Then was on down to Twenty-two, Twenty-one, on down, down, a swiftly flitting shadow in the dark, down past sleeping, unpatrolled terrace after terrace, till he arrived at last on One, which was equally silent, deserted.

Kola went swiftly west, past the unguarded office. He kept on till he came to the stacked west ladder. He leaned his battle-ax against the balustrade and easily, carefully picked up the ladder and carefully paid length after length of it down over the balustrade. The ladder finally fully down, he retrieved his ax, swung over the balustrade, descended.

The faint pale forelight of the full moon was growing on the eastern horizon as Kola swung off the last rung of the ladder and paused, listening, keen-eyed. The hillock area around the base of Sandcliff was thrashed and trampled flat, the vegetation ground to fine shreds, except for a small rocky upthrusting some four hundred paces distant, slightly to the right. But for all practical purposes it was some six hundred paces away that the heavy jungle of the valley began, untouched, again.

Kola headed straight down toward the jungle, skirted east around the rocky upthrusting, slipped into the dark jungle edge, and paused. He listened intently. The eastern light grew brighter as the full moon began riding up to light the world. The jungle was shot through with pale white-shafts of light. Kola filtered the throb of the Big Brown and the tumbling murmuring of the brook, a short one hundred paces west of where he waited.

His eyes became slits, his lips curled slightly. He went to his right. His feet were sure, avoided the treacherous softnesses, the tripping loops of vines. He waded the brook, went on. Now the soft low whistling of long deep breaths grew clearer, the strong slimy aroma of Big Snakes grew stronger. He advanced more slowly now, taking advantage of every shadow. At the edge of a thick stand of fern trees, he paused, waited for the moon to ride higher.

As the pale white shafts of light slowly swung into the dense ferns, a tremendously bulking shadow became clearer, became a single black-and-green mottled slick-skinned Big Sake lying curled in sleep, huge head resting on long curled tail. The ugly head was

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scarcely five paces from Kola. The lids were shut over bulging eyes. The monster's sides shimmered in the moonlight as they slowly rose and fell under the long whistling breaths of deep and peaceful slumber.

Kola was a silent shadow as he got into position, closer to the great head, to where the thick neck met the back of the long skull. He was now no more than three paces away, the white moonlight clearly revealing the scene. The monster stirred ever so slightly, accompanied by a rasping gasp in the breathing. Kola froze, waited, ready. The monster slept on.

Kola relaxed a moment, then was swiftly out of the fern trees' shadows, was raising his great black battle-ax overhead and straining every berry-powerful ounce of strength as he flashed the deadly weapon swiftly and blindingly once, twice, three times, razored-edge down. Each time, the great black blade bit with a soft chucking sound, sliced completely through the thick neck. The first slash ceased the breathing, the third left the ugly head hanging awry by a thread of red-netted flesh. The great body rippled once in reflex, then lay unnaturally limp. Blood spurted from the great throat artery of the severed neck.

Kola watched only a moment, a grin of gory thrill on his face, then flitted away east through the jungle, heading for the brook.

CHAPTER XXXIII

REACHING the brook, Kola washed the blade of his ax, examined it and himself critically in the clear moonlight. He bathed away the few splatters of blood on his legs, finally grunted, smiled slowly in satisfaction, then crossed the brook and stole swiftly back to the edge of the jungle that looked on the trampled center hillock area before Sandcliff.

Kola turned his eyes up at Sandcliff, towering massively above him, revealingly bathed in white moonlight. But not even on the Topland wall above terrace Twenty-five did anyone seem watching. Kola eyed the distance back to the west ladder; six hundred paces away, now moon-bathed. The rocky upthrusting was but two hundred paces away, slightly to the left. The area between it and the jungle edge from which he peered was not so trampled.

Kola crouched, took advantage of every bit of shadow to the rockiness, stole around the west, the shadowed side, and crouched, eyed the flat-trampled four hundred paces up to the waiting west ladder. There was not the slightest cover, but no one seemed watching. Kola straightened up, walked leisurely up the hillock to the base of Sandcliff and the waiting ladder.

Here he listened intently, then swiftly ascended the ladder. He let his head rise slowly above the balustrade, shot his gaze up at the terraces above, then east and west on terrace One, then was swiftly over the balustrade, across the moonlit terrace and into the doorway of the empty apartment under the west stairway.

Kola listened, moved to step out, but tensed, peered sharply east along the terrace. Someone was hurrying forward along the terrace, from the office. Then the oncomer was clearly recognizable—Scar Face. Kola muttered a curse, stepped back to the shadowed side of the foyer, leaned his battle-ax against the wall. He fingered his knife hilt, and his scowl of irritation suddenly changed to an expression of thoughtful cunning.

The hurrying footsteps neared, abruptly slowed, stopped. Scar Face,

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fully armed, was crouching, clear in the moonlight, was eyeing the spot where the west ladder should have been stacked. His wary glancing passed over the shadow concealing Kola, returned, paused, passed on. Then slowly Scar Face drew to where the ladder was down. He leaned over and peered down into the vast openness of the air about him.

Kola sprang, blurred through the white light from the moon, lit in perfect fighting balance. One huge hand instantly tightening on Scar Face's throat, the other huge hand and mighty arm binding Scar Face's frantically straining arms and clutching hands, Kola rushed his victim back into the shadows of the foyer. With the unholy speed of a striking reptile the hand of Kola's binding arm flashed to his scabbard and back and was pistoning his long black knife to the hilt, again and again, until Scar Face sagged limp from the huge vise of a hand holding him up by the throat. That was the end of the brute.

Kola let the body slip to the floor in a crumpled heap, then stooped and wiped the knife blade clean on Scar Face's blue shorts. Straightening up, he sheathed the knife, searched Scar Face. No list. Kola muttered a not-too-disappointed curse, retrieved Scar Face's battle-ax, stepped back into the foyer, dropped the ax beside Scar Face's body, stepped back out, kept to the wall as he stole to the east stairway, up it.

Kola made his way rapidly to terrace Three and stepped into the doorway of a vacant apartment, apartment Sixty-seven on Three, eight doors from Seventy-five on Three.

Kola waited, listened intently, peered back and forth along the terrace. Deserted. Silent.

Now was the time to act.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A LIGHT of shrewd anticipation was in Kola's eyes as he stepped out and sauntered openly to the doorway of apartment Seventy-five. He stepped into the foyer, leaned against the shadowed east wall of it.

"Roya!" he hissed. "Roya! Over here!"

A glad gasp came from the darkness within the main room, then the happy, "Toka!" and Roya came hurrying out into the foyer, but stopped abruptly, drew back slightly as moonlight dimly reflecting from the west wall to the east wall revealed her mistake.

"Oh!" she gasped. "You!"

"Miss me?" mocked Kola in a hoarse whisper.

"Yes," replied Roya coolly, "I enjoyed your absence very much." Then with dismissal, "Goodnight," and turned away.

"The escaped," savored Kola without moving, "has been cornered."

Roya paused, turned, her hand stole to her throat, the other hand touched on the foyer wall. She searched Kola's carefully shadowed face.

Kola began laughing softly, mockingly. "When I give the word," he gestured an arm suggestively, "we close in."

"Well," replied Roya, "you're not afraid to close in?"

Kola was amused. "I have an offer."

"Yes?"

"A very reasonable offer."

"Well?"

"Your grandfather—Old Walloo—is not well?"

"Your spies are becoming lax?"

Kola seemed only to enjoy it. "I wouldn't want to see anything happen to Old Walloo, and another."

"How sympathetic the Great Kola is becoming!"

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"You do not care what becomes of your dear grandfather, nor of a certain other?" Kola was faintly puzzled under his confident and mocking air, his toying.

"What difference does it make any more," mocked Roya pointedly, "what anyone cares of another? There is no reason for doing so any longer."

"Well," shrugged Kola, turning away, "if that's the way you feel about them. . . ."

Roya gave first, as Kola reached the outer doorway and paused there to gaze idly up and down terrace Three. "Wait," she gasped.

"Yes?"

"What are you going to do with my grandfather and Toka?"

Kola sauntered back into the foyer, leaned lazily on his battle-ax handle. His face was shadowed as he eyed the trembling Roya, who was appealingly clear in the pale white light slanting into the foyer. "The answer," he softly laughed, "is yours!"

Roya was no longer unconcerned of manner. "Well?"

"You are improving!"

"What do you want me to do!"

Kola savored the moment. "Become my Queen of Sandcliff."

Roya was silent a moment. "And if I refuse?"

"Big Snakes will begin howling for offerings in the morning."

"I thought you had changed their minds," sparred Roya, "with a potted palm."

Kola gave a short insinuating laugh and gesture. "Their minds have changed back again. So—there'll have to be a little lottery."

"Why?" sneered Roya in contempt. "Do you even bother with those lotteries?"

"They amuse me," laughed Kola. "But," elaborately magnanimous as he turned and sauntered to the outer doorway, "sleep—if you can—on my little offer, my dear." As Roya remained motionless, silent, Kola turned and softly reminded, "Whatever your answer, my dear Roya, you will return to One on Twenty-five."

He strolled away toward the east stairway upward.

CHAPTER XXXV

ROYA whirled back into the dark main room of her grandfather's apartment, threw herself down in a corner on the bare stone floor and began to sob.

After a little while Old Walloo softly stepped out from his dark back room. He paused in the pale dimness of reflected moonlight, then quickly went on now springy legs and knelt by Roya's side, placed a tender old hand on her quivering shoulder.

"Roya, baby!" he whispered in anxiety. "What is it?"

Roya rolled over. "Oh, Gramps!" she sobbed.

"Now, now," soothed Old Walloo, brushing her golden hair back from her forehead.

"Oh, Gramps," in unreasoning anguish, "they've got Toka cornered!"

"Who says so?" snorted Old Walloo.

"Kola!"

"Kola?"

"He was here, and told me."

"When?"

"A little while ago."

Old Walloo muttered under his breath. "Sleeping — like an old Big Snake!"

"But if you had heard and came out so well, he'd have suspected." Roya was becoming more reasoning.

"Was he here about the berries?"

"He didn't even mention them! Or

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why his men were after Toka?"

"Well," said Old Walloo, "if they have Toka cornered, what are they waiting for? Why doesn't Kola give the order to get him?"

"He—Kola—had an offer."

"Offer?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"He says the Big Snakes will be back in the morning, howling for victims again."

"And?"

Roya's voice caught. Old Walloo ran his hand steadyingly into hers. "He—he as much as said Toka and you would be. . . ."

"The winners?" quietly finished Old Walloo.

"Yes—unless. . . ."

"Unless what?"

"Unless I became his Queen of Sandcliff!" Roya rolled over, sobbed rackingly again.

Old Walloo sat on his thin haunches, his old head bowed. After a long moment he raised his head.

"Roya," he said. "Roya, baby."

Roya slowed her sobbing, answered with a muffled, "Yes?"

"Roll over here and listen to me."

ROYA obediently turned over, then sat up, dried her eyes on the backs of her trembling hands. Old Walloo put a now strong, though thin, arm about Roya's shoulders.

"Roya?"

"Yes, Gramps?"

"You are fond of Toka?"

"Oh, Gramps, I love him!"

Old Walloo's arm tightened gladly. "Remember, they haven't got him yet, or that hairless snake wouldn't have come here with his filty offer."

"But up on the Topland!" pointed out Roya with agony.

"Goats get along fine up there," said Old Walloo. "Plenty water stored up there in those water plants. Lots of hiding places as you should know."

"But Toka has nothing to fight with, no battle-ax, not even a knife, nothing! And every one of Kola's brutes is up there after him!"

Toka has more to fight with than all of Kola's men together," pointed out Old Walloo.

"More?"

"Brains, Roya. Wits."

"But you, Gramps?" pointed Roya after a considering moment.

"We must think of Toka and Sandcliff first," reminded Old Walloo.

"Oh, but Gramps!" she protested with a sob.

Old Walloo's arm tightened reassuringly.

"It—it doesn't seem to make any difference what we feel, or want to do—any more," wept Roya.

Old Walloo's strong old voice was hoarse with emotion. "We'll just have to have faith, Roya. Faith. And stall just as much as we can, how, when and where we can, till the storm and Toka gives the signal.

At this, Roya ceased her crying. Her voice became steady again. "Thank you, Gramps. I shouldn't have let go. Now you'd better go back to bed and rest."

"And you?" anxiously inquired Old Walloo.

"I just want to lie here and dream."

Old Walloo bent and kissed Roya on the forehead, returned to his room. Roya lay down on the bare stone floor, clasped her hands under her head, stared up through the dimness of reflected moonlight.

After a while her lips parted in sudden thought and she breathed, "Our aerie. Yes, of course. The aerie! All the rocks!" Roya smiled.

After a little while, she slept.

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CHAPTER XXXVI

THE full moon had set. Toka was awakened by the first faint gray belt of dawn in the east. He stirred, crouched up. Only his eyes above the rimming red rocks, he peered down from his aerie atop the lofty pinnacle. The world below and around about was yet in fading dark. All was silent, except for the throbbing of the Big Brown, and the drone of desultory conversation from the wall. Toka made out Kola's men on guard down there along the wall; all were slouched in poses of tired watchfulness.

All night, now morning, thought Toka. Everything ready. But no storm. Could Old Walloo be wrong?

Toka pondered it as he crouched back down on his haunches, took up one of the water plants from beside him, bit into its smooth roundness, sucked out a quenching portion of the cool moisture stored within. He was placing the plant down again among the rest when the angry Big Snake roar blasted up from the valley, volleyed in echo.

Toka crouched up, peered carefully over the rimming rocks, searched down into the jungles of the valley, found the source. He automatically saw that the guards were also searching the valley with their equally sharp eyes.

A big Snake, a huge armor-plated specimen was standing half into a stand of fern trees scarcely eight hundred paces southwest from the west base of Sandcliff. The armor-plate's huge head, mouth open and roaring was extended skyward at a sharp angle. He was between Toka's view and whatever was causing the outraged roaring of imperitive summons to others of his genus. From out of the jungle of the valley Big Snakes of every kind promptly roused themselves and hurriedly converged toward the big armor-plate.

That monster moved aside enough for Toka's keen eyes to see. Toka's jaw snapped at the sight. A huge black-and-green-slick skin lay in a pool of blood among the fern trees, huge head hanging awry by a shred of flesh. Toka heard the guards exclaiming wonderingly as they, too, took in the sight. Then the Big Snakes of the area had gathered around the beheaded were rumblingly inspecting him.

Toka was suddenly struck by the appearance of one of the inspecting Big Snakes, a huge black-and-green mottled slick-skinned one, sizable length of tail missing, head and snout a mass of red coagulated wounds and welts, the midneck nerve center area a huge swollen bulb of welts and wounds. It was the Big Snake that Rok and he had bested, had supposedly killed. Except for a slow painfulness of movement, the victim of Rok's and his battling seemed well on its way to recovery. Toka was glad of that.

But that other big black-and-green slick-skin down there in those fern trees would never recover. Toka knew no weak red-headed battle-ax had done that, nor no ordinary man had wielded the black battle-ax that must have done it. There was only one combination that answered. The hairless devil had moved in an unforeseen way, yet a direct and positive way to more than reestablish the Big Snake danger.

TOKA keenly eyed the Big Snakes' reactions to the beheading of one of their members. Curiously, ominously, they only quietly rumbled. Finally six gathered round the deceased. They stooped and with their forelimbs gently lifted him. His head dangled, dropped free. A seventh quickly picked it up. These seven leading the way, all the Big Snakes formed into a procession and

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headed down valley, toward the huge expanse of gulping tawny slime.

At the edge of the huge slime field, all the Big Snakes gathered into a semi-circle round the seven and the dead one. To a slow chanting the head was tossed out into the gulping muck, quickly began sinking. Then as the chanting continued the body was tossed out, fell grotesquely limp and sprawling, began sinking. The slow weird chanting of the Big Snakes continued till the beheaded passed from sight and only the rising sun glistened on the tawny gulping slime field. The chanting ceased, the very air seemed to charge, seemed to weight with mounting ominousness.

A moment of motionless silence, and the Big Snakes slowly turned and headed steadily, purposefully back up the valley, back toward Sandcliff. The ugly reptilian features were grim, set with vengeance. Toka doubted if the Big Snakes would now be satisfied with anything short of all Sandcliff. But evidently the guards down there along the wall never had the thought, or if they did, covered it well; their words to each other were still sure, easy.

The Big Snakes continued on their way, steadily, eventually, even-paced, back toward Sandcliff. They finally arrived and spread out to surround Sandcliff on the front and sides. They stayed back about two hundred human paces from the base, waited while three great armor-plated spike-backs, evidently leaders, conferred with much pointing and gesturing. They apparently were concentrating on the first terrace.

Toka was chilled by the cool deadliness, the amazing planning this attack was going to have back of it. Evidently the monsters well knew that once the first rise was bested Sandcliff was conquered, could be easily ravaged.

The great speaking drum was suddenly lazily throbbing, "All patrols and warriors back to terraces. All patrols and warriors back to terraces."

Toka watched the guards along the wall jog to the center, crowd through the

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timber gate and down the stairway. They were glad to be relieved of their tedious watching. The Big Snakes seemed unperturbed, not the least distracted from their planning by the sudden drumming.

Toka's thoughts shot to Roya, to Rissa, to the terraces of Sandcliff, The Plan. Toka crouched down, had a faintly disturbing thought. Perhaps

The Big Snakes trooped toward Sandcliff

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they had underestimated Kola's cunning. But Toka curled up on the shaded east side of the aerie, slept, again subconsciously alert. Old Walloo could not be wrong; he had to be right. And he, Toka, had to be fresh.

CHAPTER XXXVII

ROYA was just sitting up as Old Walloo came striding from his back room and into the dawn-dim main.

"Some Big Snake sure mad again," observed Old Walloo.

"Kola's hand!" replied Roya as she stood up. She followed Old Walloo into the foyer. "Careful, Gramps!" she warned in a whisper. "Don't let them see you so well again."

"I'm just going to the doorway," replied Old Walloo. "Besides, the terraces are probably still deserted of patrols."

He and Roya paused at the doorway, peered carefully up and down the terrace Three. The others tenanting Three were out to the balustrade, watching something in the valley below, apparently the roaring Big Snake.

"You wait inside now," whispered Roya to Old Walloo. "I'll go and see what it is."

Old Walloo drew back into the dim foyer as Roya stepped out into the morning sunlight, out to the balustrade. He saw Roya's hands grip white on the balustrade as the Big Snake's summoning roaring ceased and was supplanted by many low and angry rumblings. There were wondering, apprehensive mutterings from Three and the near other terraces. Old Walloo waited impatiently as the rumblings faded down valley, then the mysterious chantings, then the earth-trembling vibrations of the Big Snakes' ominous return. Roya came quickly into the foyer.

"One of them—a big slick-skin—beheaded, last night," she reported. "Apparently while it slept." She shuddered. Old Walloo put an arm around her, waited. Roya, in short quick sentences, vividly reported the actions of the Big Snakes. Old Walloo slowly nodded, shook his head regretfully.

"Kola!" he muttered. "Bad. Bad!"

He and Roya tensed as the huge drum suddenly throbbed the patrols and warriors from the Topland and back to their terraces. Roya looked wide-eyed to Old Walloo, paled, trembled.

"Now, now," he tried to reassure, "if they'd got him they'd be bragging of it."

Roya looked away, stopped the trembling of her mouth, straightened up. "Guess I'd better get us some breakfast, Gramps. Help me with the vault, then you better go and lie down, so if they come searching. . . ."

"Chin up, Roya baby," whispered Old Walloo. "It won't be long now; my bones are yelling it to me. Don't you worry at all."

Roya managed a smile, and Old Walloo retired to his back room.

Roya took out the leaf-wrapped piece of Big Snake tail meat, shut the vault, walked quickly into the foyer. She knelt and uncovered the smouldering fire, laid on a few dry twigs from the scant pile and carefully prodded the fire to life. She set the large kettle, in which still lay the old goat horn, over the fire. She half filled the kettle from the water urn. She took up the blood-crusted food knife, poured a few drops of water from the urn over it, then vigorously wiped it clean and dry on a piece of waste leaf. She then unwrapped the chunk of Big Snake meat, held it over the kettle of warming water, took up the food knife.

"We'll take that!" came a coarse mocking voice from the doorway.

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AS ROYA jerked round, Flat Nose, the patrol leader she had stabbed the day before, and his three underlings strode in. With a sneer Flat Nose snatched the meat from Roya's hand. Roya stood up, coolly faced the leering quartet.

"I'll take your little plaything too," sneered Flat Nose. He'd handed the meat to one of the underlings, and idly swung his wicked black battle-ax as he held out his free hand. His eyes were cold fire into Roya's.

Without expression, she took the knife by the blade, offered it handle first. Flat Nose took it, stood eyeing Roya.

"A shame," he mocked, "to let such talents go to waste!"

Roya stood quietly.

"Here!" Flat Nose handed the knife back, handle first, then took the meat from his underling, also returned it to Roya. "You may prepare breakfast now—for the patrols of terrace Three." As Roya coolly returned his gaze, he snarled, "All of it! Now! Get busy!"

Roya turned and knelt beside the kettle, filled it full from the urn, cut all the meat into the bubbling water.

The patrols wandered on into the main room, the rear room, laughed derisively at Old Walloo, returned to the foyer, leaned their battle-axes against the wall and lounged around, their devouring eyes on Roya as she quietly stirred the kettle's contents.

A few more moments and the tender meat was cooked, the water a golden broth. Roya took up four red clay bowls, filled them with broth and meat, and without expression served them to the patrols. They began drinking the broth noisily, gulping the pieces of meat coarsely.

Roya knelt again beside the kettle. It was now empty except for the hollow old goat horn lying on the bottom. Roya half filled the kettle with water, put a few more dry twigs on the fire, began another slow stirring. The patrols, lounging behind her, tossed the emptied bowls to the foyer floor, grunting carelessly as the bowls broke. Roya continued her stirring.

"Quiet, ain't she, boys?" observed Flat Nose. His underlings laughed softly, expectantly. "Never think she'd have the gumption to be a knifer, would you?"

Roya continued to stir the kettle's pale watery contents.

"She really ought to make up for her little carving trick on me!" The underlings chuckled lewdly, urgingly. "Stand up here!"

Flat Nose caught Roya by her hair, yanked her upright. She gasped from the pain, tried to tear the hand free. It only tightened and twisted the more.

OLD Walloo, weaponless, came racing from the back room. The three underlings, momentarily surprised at his transformation, attacked barehanded and with glee. Old Walloo fought fiercely, but was no match for the trio of youthful brutes. He quickly sprawled limply on the floor of the main room, blood trickling from battered nose and mouth. The underlings turned back to enjoy their leader's efforts. His knife was now out, its point pricking warningly between Roya's breasts.

"Want it full length?" mocked Flat Nose.

Roya's arms slowly dropped to her sides. Flat Nose held her at arm's length by the hair, admired her frankly.

"Now that's better!" He laughed softly. "Knives are very handy!"

"You wouldn't do this if—" Roya gasped as the hand tightened, twisted cruelly, as the knife point warned.

"If your smart little boy friend was

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here?" Flat Nose and his underlings were amused. Roya paled even more as Flat Nose laughed softly. "Don't worry. He won't bother anybody any more."

Roya slumped as the great drum began throbbing. The four patrols paused to listen, looked at each other in wonder, then grabbed their axes and hurried out.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A TERRACE Two patrol, breathless from hurrying up twenty-two flights of the west stairway, raced toward Kola and Kagi as they stood together beside the balustrade of the projecting west end of Twenty-five and leaned on their battle-axes and eyed the ominously waiting and rumbling and intensely conferring Big Snakes. Kola and Kagi were waiting for the patrol's arrival.

"Well?" Kola was scowling.

The patrol gulped for air. His eyes were protruding wide.

"Well," roared Kola, "spill it!"

"We thought it best not to use the drum!" gasped the patrol.

"Well, get it out!" bellowed Kola.

"Scar Face!" gasped the patrol. "Down on One!"

"What about Scar Face?" roared Kola.

"Dead! Stabbed! In the back!"

Kola and Kagi eyed each other wonderingly. Kagi appeared puzzled; Kola equally so.

"So. In the back!" repeated Kola significantly.

"Yeah," echoed Kagi. "In the back."

"And the west ladder is still down!" said the patrol.

"So," smiled Kagi.

"But how did he get down from the Top?" snarled Kola in wonder.

"Perhaps," offered Kagi, "there is more than one way to the Top."

Kola shot Kagi a baleful glance. "Meaning?"

Kagi only smiled, shrugged enigmatically.

Kola grunted in irritation, waved the patrol back to his post, leaned over the balustrade, bellowed to the drummers, "All tenants into their apartments! And stay there! All patrols and warriors on active duty! All right, repeat it!"

The huge drum was swiftly throbbing the order, repeating it. Every terrace was soon flowing with warriors and two sets of patrols.

Kagi trotting to keep up, Kola strode on past the near west elevator, on to the east elevator. Kola and Kagi were quickly aboard and being swiftly lowered toward terrace One. Kola kept eyeing the Big Snakes, which were still waiting, watching and planning with an ominousness that was not unfelt by the nerves.

"Queer," muttered Kola, "the way those crazy Big Snakes are acting this time."

"Yeah, Chief," replied Kagi, a perceptible tinge of nervousness in his own voice. "But they can't do anything to *us!*" He sneered derisively down at the angry monsters.

"Anybody's knife or ax missing?" asked Kola.

"If any of the boys were," replied Kagi, "we'd have known it before now."

Kola grunted.

"All the lads had their tools last night," said Kagi.

A WORRIED Red Eye, Broken Nose and the seven remaining underlings of terrace One met the elevator. Red Eye and Broken Nose acknowledged Kagi only in the dutiful

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manner of servants.

"Where is he?" growled Kola as he and Kagi slid from the sling.

Red Eye hurriedly led the way west toward the vacant apartment. Kola, looking ahead along the terrace, saw the west ladder was still down over the balustrade. He nodded at two of the underlings.

"Get that west ladder stacked back up here!"

As the two raced on ahead to the task, Red Eye explained apprehensively, "We left everything just as we found it, you see, Great Kola."

Kola grunted. They were now at the doorway of the vacant apartment Thirty-three, under the west stairway and directly back of the underlings completing the stacking of the west ladder.

"Well, there he is, Great Kola," pointed Red Eye. "Just as we found him a few minutes ago."

The rest stayed clear as Kola and Kagi stepped slowly in and circled around the crumpled form of Scar Face. He lay face down in a drying pool of blood from wounds in the back. His battle-ax lay unused, his knife still in scabbard.

"Search this place yet?" growled Kola to Red Eye.

"We were waiting for you, Great Kola," replied Red Eye.

"Search it."

Red Eye barked orders to Broken Nose and the seven underlings, the two dispatched to draw up the west ladder having done their task and rejoined the party. The apartment under feverish search, Kola and Kagi circled thoughtfully and eyed the dead Scar Face. Kola drew Scar Face's knife, displayed its significantly clean blade to Kagi, then replaced the knife. Kagi finally leaned on his battle-ax and smiled at Kola.

"He made sure, anyway."

Kola grunted. "A battle-knife, all right. But what was Scar Face doing down here last night?"

Broken Nose was near, and said, "Scar Face was near me on the wall last night."

"Well?" rasped Kola.

Broken Nose was eager to please the great one. His eyes kept up their habitual shifting. "Scar Face said he forgot something down here."

"Forgot what, Broken Nose?" asked Kagi smoothly.

"He didn't say, Chief Kagi," replied Broken Nose.

"What did he say?" rasped Kola.

"He just up and left, saying he'd be back in a little while. And everybody thought it was all right."

"Naturally," agreed Kagi easily.

KOLA only grunted, looked around for Red Eye, saw him coming out from the back room. "Well?"

"Nothing, Great Kola," said Red Eye. He, Broken Nose and the seven underlings stood waiting.

Kola eyed Kagi significantly. "The back business is familiar."

Kagi nodded reflectively. "Was probably surprised by Scar Face before or after cutting off the head of that slick-skin. Knifed Scar Face before the poor guy could do anything. Threw him in here."

"But where'd he get the knife and ax!" snarled Kola in typical irritation. "He didn't use Scar Face's! And I happen to know the reserve stock of knives and axes hasn't been touched!"

Kagi indicated ignorance. "How'd he get down from the Top? The boys were no more than arm's length apart all the way across."

"And where is he now?" puzzled Kola.

"If he's still down there. . . ." Kagi jerked a thumb to indicate the direc-

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tion of the valley and Big Snakes, then shrugged and smiled thinly.

Red Eye, Broken Nose and the seven underlings grinned, as they evidently thought it their privilege and duty. Kola only grunted dryly, was evidently pondering what to do with the dead Scar Face.

"Two of you," he nodded at two of the underlings, "pack him up to the court and park him on the front of the dais."

Kola leading, Kagi, Red Eye and Broken Nose and the remaining underlings went out onto the terrace and strode east in silence toward the waiting elevator. Kola eyed the terrace, the apartment openings. He ignored the many warriors pacing the terrace. At apartment Fifty—the office—Kola stopped, faced Red Eye, Broken Nose and the underlings.

"Nothing more for now," he rasped. "But keep your eyes open and your ears clean!"

"Yes, Great Kola!" replied Red Eye. Broken Nose and the underlings repeated Red Eye's affirmation.

"There'll be fifty berries apiece in this for all of you!" growled Kola as he turned away toward the waiting east elevator.

Red Eye and Broken Nose were no more pleasantly surprised than Kagi, who was suddenly fixed of expression. "Thanks, Great Kola!" called Red Eye and Broken Nose.

Kola, Kagi following a pace behind, only waved an arm shortly in acknowledgement.

Red Eye and Broken Nose eyed each other a moment, rubbed their chins in thought, then turned back into the office.

At the sling, Kola faced Kagi, and whispered exasperatedly, "What do you make of it anyway?"

Kagi shrugged, frowned. "Chief, I just *can't* figure it!"

Kola rubbed his jaw a speculative moment, then, "I think I'll have a little look into Seventy-five on Three on my way back."

Kagi grunted. "Not a bad idea, Chief. And I think I'll have a little look around this terrace again." He was in worried thought. "There might be something we missed."

Kola grunted affirmation. "Okay. See you later on Twenty-five."

"Right, Chief!" Kagi turned away, strolled cold-eyed back toward the center of One, toward the office of Red Eye and Broken Nose.

Kola smiled as he slipped into the sling of the elevator. He jerked the rope sharply three times, was promptly hoisted toward Three.

CHAPTER XXXIX

KAGI came to the doorway of Fifty on One, the office of Red Eye and Broken Nose. The remaining underlings were lounging just outside, and apparently none regarded the office as suspect or worthy of use; it was ignored.

"Keep to the west end a while," directed Kagi.

"Right, Chief!" The underlings hurried away.

Kagi sauntered through the foyer. Red Eye and Broken Nose grinned in welcome as they sprawled in their chairs. The grins quickly faded at the cold mien under Kagi's suave smile. Kagi sat down in a chair opposite them. Red Eye and Broken Nose began to stir uncomfortably under Kagi's drilling green eyes.

"I suppose," purred Kagi, "you know who put away Scar Face?"

"Toka!" rasped Red Eye positively.

Kagi sneered and his conferees flushed. "Toka!" he spat.

"But — but — " stammered Broken

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Nose, "Kola said so!"

"And so did you!" pointed out Red Eye.

"You pretty dumbbells," mocked Kagi. "You blind dummies." As the objects of his scorn flushed and squirmed, Kagi went on, "Didn't you see those black finger marks on what was once Scar Face's throat? Tell me, my pretty dumbbells, who in Sandcliff can grip like that?"

Red Eye's optics went wide in horrible memory, his brow beaded in sweat. "Kola!" breathed Red Eye.

"Yes," purred Kagi, "the Great Kola."

Broken Nose's eyes began shifting even more nervously. "Then—then—he —*he* killed that big Snake, too, last night!"

Kagi smiled thinly. "Keep trying and you two may learn something after all."

"But I don't get it, Chief!" blurted Red Eye. "Why Scar Face?"

Kagi sneered disgust. "He'd used Scar Face to spy on us down here."

Red Eye and Broken Nose jerked, paled in shock, gaped, began trembling. Kagi's quietness of manner was more effective than if he had adopted a shouting tone.

Kagi gave a short, humorless laugh. "Yes, that rat of a Scar Face was to have his ear in everything. Last night, Scar Face was no longer of any use. So . . ." Kagi smiled, turned his palms up, shrugged expressively.

His pair of listeners moistened their twitching lips.

"Then—then—" stammered Broken Nose, "he—he—Kola—know all about everything! Us—everything!"

"Wha-wha-what'll he do—you suppose?" asked Red Eye.

KAGI'S green eyes drilled. "The Great Kola," he softly replied, "won't pay off with berries."

Red Eye and Broken Nose were ashen, trembling hulks.

"What'll we do?" gasped Broken Nose.

"Yeah!" echoed Red Eye desperately. "You got up this thing! Now what?"

Kagi leaned back in his chair, smiling.

"Don't just sit there like that!" pleaded Red Eye.

"Tell us what to do!" pleaded Broken Nose.

"Just what we planned," replied Kagi. "Just what we planned—at the lottery, this afternoon." As his pair stared, Kagi pointed out, "From here on in, it's us or him. It must be him—as we planned."

"But how?" blurted Red Eye. "If he knows—"

Kagi laughed reassuringly. "He doesn't know quite everything. Not quite everything. And he thinks we don't know that he knows."

Red Eye and Broken Nose brightened a bit.

"Scar Face," went on Kagi depreciatively, "wasn't too good. I heard his reports." He smiled, and his two listeners responded. "Besides," he continued, "how can Kola stop us now? We've got everything lined up, ready—and once we start. . . ." He smiled, shrugged expressively.

Broken Nose grinned, but observed, "I'd hate to be any twenty guys to put him away!"

"Naturally," smiled Kagi, "we'll have berries."

Red Eye and Broken Nose were almost their old selves now.

"You get 'em yet?" eagerly asked Red Eye.

"It wasn't the sucker still up on the Top," savored Kagi, "who got those fifty packs out of One on Twenty-five."

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Red Eye and Broken Nose relaxed, grinned broadly, leaned back in their chairs.

"Yes, boys," said Kagi as he rose, "we'll just go right ahead. Everything to win, remember. Berries."

His hearers licked their heavy lips greedily.

"Women," whispered Kagi.

His hearers' eyes shone bright with lust.

"Be seeing you!" Kagi sauntered out through the foyer. "Soon." He'd countered Kola's influence.

Kagi saw that the two underlings who had carried Scar Face's body to the court were back and patrolling with the five other regulars along the far west end. Groups of warriors were still about, but never ceased their alert-eyed patrolling. Kagi turned, looked up at Sandcliff, saw Kola's elevator, the east one, still waiting up on Three. Kagi waved commandingly to the head operator of the west elevator. It was promptly lowered away from Twenty-five. Kagi sauntered to meet it. He glanced occasionally over the balustrade and disdainfully eyed the rumbling and planning Big Snakes. He encountered the seven underlings, smiled affably.

"Just patrol as before," he directed.

The seven underlings nodded smiling acknowledgement.

Kagi was at his waiting elevator now. He slipped into the sling, yanked the rope once, was swiftly hoisted away.

CHAPTER XL

THE two shifts of patrols of Three hurried to meet Kola, to assist him if necessary.

"How you feeling, Flat Nose?" growled Kola of the leader.

Flat Nose grinned, flexed his huge-muscled body in demonstration. "Better than new, Great Kola—thanks to you!"

Kola grunted, spun Flat Nose around and narrowly eyed his back. No more than nearly healed pink scars showed where Roya's food knife had bit deep.

"Too bad Scar Face had to get it," rasped Flat Nose, turning back to face Kola. "Looks like they improved by practising on me!"

"Anything suspicious around here?" growled Kola.

Flat Nose grinned slyly. "Yeah."

"What?"

"That Old Walloo must have got hold of plenty berries somewheres."

"Why?"

"There's nothing the matter with the old rat! Or wasn't," added Flat Nose, "till a little while ago."

Kola shot Flat Nose a keen look. "Meaning?"

"A little argument," grinned Flat Nose. "Some of the boys had themselves a workout."

Three of the boys grinned as Kola eyed all seven.

"And the girl?" asked Kola ominously.

Flat Nose fawned. "Still there, Great Kola. Still there—waiting."

"Then keep clear!" Kola turned and strode east toward Seventy-five.

Kola came to the doorway out of which a wisp of blue-gray smoke was trailing upward. He paused, looked in. On the floor of the foyer a large kettle of weak watery broth gave off faint vapors as a fading fire still warmed it. Kola silently stepped into the foyer, battle-ax ready, other hand on knife hilt. But in the main room Roya was kneeling over the thin form of Old Walloo, was dabbing his face with a swab of old goatskin moistened from the nearby water urn.

"Well," observed Kola, trying for

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concern, "what happened here!"

Roya paused a moment without turning or looking up, then went on swabbing the blood from Old Walloo's face. The old grandfather was unconscious. Kola stepped over to his side, squatted and felt for the pulse. A moment later he turned to Roya with a suggestive smile.

"He can live."

"Do you care?" replied Roya.

"You do," came back Kola significantly.

Roya didn't reply. She moistened the swab again from the urn and continued to clean Old Walloo's face.

"You've heard the news?" offered Kola slyly.

Roya ignored him.

"Last night a patrol was killed."

Roya still ignored him.

"He was stabbed—in the back."

AS ROYA appeared not to have heard him, Kola flushed slightly, rose and stood over her.

Old Walloo's face cleansed, Roya laid aside the swab, felt the old man's pulse, his brow.

"Why don't you give him some berries?" mocked Kola.

"We have no berries," replied Roya.

Kola laughed shortly. "Fifty packs—and *you* haven't any!"

Roya stood up, faced Kola calmly.

"What's the matter?" grinned Kola. "Did he hold out on you too?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," replied Roya.

"I suppose you'll tell me next the old man didn't have any berries lately!"

Roya walked past Kola and into the foyer, knelt and put more twigs on the fire, resumed stirring the broth. Kola had followed, was standing beside her, leaning on his battle-ax.

"Big Snakes are back too," he said.

"You knew they would be."

"And I also know they'll be wanting. Remember?"

"There'll be one they'll never get."

Kola was amused. "No?"

"No."

"And who won't they get?"

Roya never looked up, never twitched a muscle. "Your patrols didn't tell you?" She steadily ladled a spoonful of the broth, tasted it.

The ladle clattered sharply to the stone floor. Roya gasped with pain as Kola grasped her naked shoulder, yanked her to her feet, spun her facing him. His face was darkly lewd, lips curling back from black-stained teeth. He held her shoulder in one huge hand, the fingers a vise. Roya's face had drained white, her lips tried not to twitch. Her head was proudly erect.

"What didn't my patrols tell me?" snarled Kola.

"I thought you knew."

"Know what?" His thick fingers bit deeper, to bones and tendons.

"About Toka!" cried Roya, jerking vainly under the grip. "He's dead! You had him killed!"

Kola's jaw sagged, his face was a reflection of his stunned, bewildered, whirling mind. His hand dropped from Roya's shoulder. She leaned back against the foyer wall, trembled, rubbed where the fingers had bruised blue. Kola looked dumbly at her.

"Dead? Killed? Toka?" he asked. "Who told you?"

"Flat Nose."

"Flat Nose!" gaped Kola. Again he stood in bewildered thought. Then slowly a sly expression came over his brutish features. He eyed Roya with his mocking smile. "Very good try!" he rasped. "Very smart! But not smart enough!"

Roya only looked at him in wonder and hesitant relief.

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"But I can wait a little longer," went on Kola insinuatingly. "Remember, the Big Snakes will be wanting—and a patrol has been murdered—stabbed in the back!" As Roya only stared at him blankly, he enjoyed the reminder. "First, we'll have a little trial. Then a nice lottery!" He laughed in amusement. "Circumstantial evidence, of course. I'll have my east elevator waiting for your decision."

His battle-ax carelessly struck and shattered the kettle as he walked to the doorway. He turned, grinned as he glanced at the weak broth fizzing out the fire and spreading over a section of the foyer floor, the old goat-horn-a-glistening, curved island.

Roya eyed the wreckage without expression.

"You won't need it anyway," observed Kola.

Roya looked up at him, past him, into space. "No, we won't need it—after today."

Kola's face lightened in surprise. He bowed elaborately. "My elevator is waiting!"

"For you," replied Roya. "Only for you." She turned and walked straightly back into the main room and toward Old Walloo.

Kola stood there a moment, then a faint smile of ugly anticipation came over his face, an unholy light into his opaque blue eyes. He grunted, turned and strode for his waiting east elevator. Flat Nose was lounging near it, the underlings were off west patrolling, the warriors pacing in two's and three's. Flat Nose grinned knowingly at Kola.

Kola rasped, "I'm sending this elevator back down here! If the girl wants to use it it's all right!"

"Right, Great Kola!" said Flat Nose.

Kola slipped into the sling. He jiggled the rope, was swiftly hoisted toward Twenty-five.

CHAPTER XLI

AS KAGI was being boomed in over the balustrade of the stairway landing of Twenty-five he saw Kola stride from Seventy-five on Three to the waiting east elevator. Slipping out of the sling of the west elevator and onto Twenty-five, Kagi stepped to the balustrade near the stairway leading up from Twenty-four. He casually looked back down to Three, saw Kola slip into the sling of the east elevator as Flat Nose stood watching. Kola signaled for hoisting to Twenty-five. Kagi turned away from the balustrade, looked casually up to the two winch operators, who were once again sitting on the fore edge of the recess. They were seated with their well-muscled tan shanks and sandaled feet dangling. They were looking down at the Big Snakes. The head operator lounged on the balustrade of the stairway landing, and was facing Kagi.

"Too bad about Scar Face, Chief," observed the head operator experimentally.

Kagi only nodded, sauntered on along the cool canopied terrace. He idly swung his battle-ax in time with his self-important strutting. Occasionally he paused briefly to converse condescendingly with those of Twenty-five who were about. The topic was Scar Face. Kagi contrived to meet Kola just as the great one slipped from the sling of the east elevator.

"Well?" growled Kola.

Kagi shrugged. "Nothing, Chief. Not a thing."

Kola grunted, beckoned Kagi to follow, and strode toward One on Twenty-five. Kola grunted, waved his arm shortly in acknowledgment of the greetings of the few of his men and their

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women who were about on the terrace. At apartment Two, Kagi paused before his tall, bony slave, so statuesque beside the doorway.

"Come on, come on!" rasped Kola impatiently. "No time for that stuff now!"

But Kagi spat into the slave's expressionless face before he followed Kola into apartment One.

The foyer and main room were unoccupied, the doors to the side terrace open. Kola strode to the doors, swept the side terrace with a glance. The retreat, too, was unoccupied. Kola turned back into the main room.

"We'll talk in my room," he rasped, leading the way into the corridor.

The door to the first bedroom was open, revealing it to be unoccupied. The door to Rissa's bedroom was shut. Kagi lecherously eyed it.

As he reached up and pressed the unlocking masonry of the closed door of his own room, Kola grinned at Kagi. "Got to put another combination on this place!"

Kagi replied, "Just walking in and out of the place, eh, Chief?" He followed Kola into the room.

The door shut itself, covering the soft sound of the passage door across the corridor quickly opening and shutting on Rissa's stealthy return.

KOLA laid his huge battle-ax on the table, motioned for Kagi to do likewise with his own, then flopped into the lounge. He grinned up at the standing Kagi. "Let's have some berries!"

Kagi glanced easily at Kola, had his automatic smile on his narrow features. He smoothed his already sleek hair. "Sure, Chief. Where are they?"

Kola's lips curled in amusement, his eyes were toying. "This is the way to the vault!" He gestured around the room.

Kagi smiled. "But where do we go from here, Chief?"

"Not the floor," toyed Kola. "Not the ceiling."

"Which leaves but four possible answers," responded Kagi easily. "North, south, east and west."

"Let's take east," said Kola. "The direction from which we entered."

"The door," enumerated Kagi, "and a not-thick-enough wall, and the corridor."

"Consider the west," prodded Kola.

"Two windows," said Kagi with a smile, "and a not-thick-enough wall, and the side terrace."

"The south, for instance," said Kola.

"Once more," enumerated Kagi suavely, "a not-thick-enough wall, and the lovely Rissa's room."

"Which leaves. . . ." Kola gestured across the room to the north wall with its large inlay of a grazing goat.

"I don't see anything, Chief."

"There are," said Kola, "many possible details."

Kagi sauntered to the wall, ran his hands over the inlay. "Not the grass."

"Perhaps the clouds," smiled Kola. His eyes were sharp on Kagi's bland face.

"Nope."

"Or the rocks."

"No go."

"The horns."

"The same."

"The hooves, perhaps."

"But not."

"The eyes."

"Which one?" Kagi laughed softly. "Why not both at once?"

Kagi obediently fumbled at the eyes. The half of that wall swung out. Kagi gaped, turned admiringly to Kola.

Kola was watching, shrewd-eyed. "Take out a couple of packs," he di-

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rected.

Kagi turned to step into the vault, stopped short in amazement, gave a low whistle. "What a stock, Chief!"

Kola laughed softly. "Not too bad, is it? Bring out two packs."

Kagi stepped in, took up two full packs of berries, returned to Kola and extended them.

"One for each of us," replied Kola, taking one and ripping open a corner. "Grab a chair!"

CHAPTER XLII

KAGI lazed into a chair where he could eye the open vault and its wealth. He, too, opened a corner of his pack and like Kola spilled out a handful of berries and began greedy eating. His green gaze was drawn as if the vault's contents were a magnet.

Kola eyed Kagi with a faintly amused smile. Kagi became aware of it, appeared faintly uneasy under his habitually suave manner.

"Too bad about Scar Face, though, Chief," he offered.

"In a way."

There was a silence broken only by the sounds of chewing and swallowing.

"Who we going to give the rap to for it, Chief?" asked Kagi.

Kola never took his eyes off Kagi's face. "Who'd you put up?"

Kagi had a slight smile. "His Royal Highness, of course, Chief. But I don't see how we can."

"No?"

Kagi remained suave as he glanced at Kola. "How can we—if the Big Snakes got him, maybe?"

"Maybe," insinuated Kola, "they didn't get him."

Kagi's green eyes and narrow features sharpened.

"Maybe," rasped Kola, "he's up on the Top—again."

Kagi appeared to ponder a moment toward the open vault. He mouthed another handful of berries, chewed, swallowed. "Could be, Chief. If he could get down without being caught, he could get back up again, I guess." Kagi faced Kola easily. "Shall I have the lads go over that place?"

Kola merely smiled, his eyes glittered. "I'll make him come in—by himself. Then, on the evidence. . . ." Kola grinned at Kagi's half humorous but questioning look, mouthed another handful of berries. The pack was empty. Kola crumpled the wrapping leaf, tossed it across the room and into the vault. It fell on the floor among others.

Kagi still had half his pack left. He carefully folded over the corner, sealed it, looked at Kola.

"Keep it!" waved Kola.

"Thanks, Chief," easily replied Kagi. "I can use them."

"Getting low?" asked Kola with a smile.

"A little," smiled Kagi. . . . "But what's the orders on this Scar Face thing, Chief?" He was now the all-too-willing right hand.

Kola sprawled in the lounge, lazily eyed the open vault. "Better shut that thing, Kagi."

"Right, Chief!"

Kagi rose, stepped to the table, laid his half pack of berries beside his battle-ax, then stepped to the swung-out half of Kola's north wall. He pushed against the outer side, tried to swing the half wall back into place. It stood into the room, seemingly immovable. Kagi appeared puzzled, tried again, strained audibly, failed.

Kola was smiling mockingly.

KAGI straightened, eyed Kola with a half-humorous frown and smile. "What you suppose is wrong with the

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thing, Chief?"

"Try the goat's left fore hoof," softly directed Kola.

Kagi obediently stepped to the other half of the north wall, fumbled at the designated hoof, then stood in proper surprise as the swung-out half of wall sighed shut. He turned to Kola admiringly.

"Nobody could beat this thing, Chief! It's the best job you ever did!"

Kola gave a short laugh as Kagi reseated himself. "Oh, maybe not the best job, Kagi. Take the side terrace, now. That really took the stuff!"

"Yeah?" urged Kagi, not too eagerly. But his green eyes were strangely alight.

Kola smiled. "Yeah. And I may demonstrate it to you, sometime."

Again Kagi's suave air failed to cover completely his uneasiness. He played his thin fingers together in betraying nervousness, stirred in his chair.

"Anything wrong, Kagi?" rasped Kola.

Kagi frowned carefully. "This Scar Face business. . . ."

Kola readily nodded. "—is a bit queer."

"I just can't figure it, Chief! Why should he want to put away a Big Snake?"

Kola shrugged. "Who can figure those dumb rats downstairs? Maybe His Royal Highness got peeved over that other Big Snake coming to, and so he wanted to make sure on another one. Crazy rat anyway!"

"I'd like to know whose ax and knife he used!" said Kagi.

Kola gave a rasping laugh. "Oh, we'll get it all out of him when he gives himself up."

Kagi was smiling as usual, but his green eyes were narrow, careful.

"By the way," queried Kola, "are all the lads satisfied?"

Kagi's green eyes suavely returned Kola's opaque blue gaze. "Haven't heard any of them squawking, Chief."

"All of them ready?"

"All ready, Chief.. Always ready."

Kola grunted. "No funny ideas about anything?"

"Funny ideas?"

"Yeah. Such as putting away one another."

Kagi exploded into gales of laughter. Kola smiled faintly but his opaque blue eyes were mirthless.

"Chief!" reproved Kagi with high humor. "Chief! Don't I keep telling you not to be an old woman! Why would the lads want to do anything like putting one another away?"

Kola waited until Kagi quieted. "Well," he rasped, "why?"

Kagi's manner showed shock. "Chief! You—you don't suspect *me*—your old right hand! Why—why—"

THERE was a sharp knock on the door. Kola frowned. Kagi appeared relieved, drew his hand across his brow, which was strangely beaded with perspiration.

"Well," roared Kola, "who is it!"

"Rissa," came her rippling voice, mocking.

"Ill open the door, Chief!" Kagi was already striding for the door.

As the door swung in, Kola slyly remarked, "The trusted right hand is familiar with the release."

But Kagi seemed not to hear. Rissa was standing in the doorway, her exotic tan body stirringly attired in cobalt-blue briefs, her tiaraed black fall of hair framing her beautiful features. Kagi bowed fawningly.

Rissa gave him no more than an amused sneer, addressed Kola, "A little visitor to see the Great Kola."

"Visitor?" echoed Kola eagerly.

From down on terrace Three, I be-

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lieve," mocked Rissa.

Kola was instantly striding toward the doorway. "Where is she! Do you hear me?"

"Waiting," purred Rissa, her dark eyes holding a strange fire, "in the foyer."

Kola strode on up the corridor. Coming into the main room, he paused, fists on hips, looked out into the foyer, admired the view. Roya was a straight sun-haired picture of arousing beauty, back to him, gazing out toward the terrace, seemingly into the cloudless sky beyond.

"Come in, my dear!" called Kola.

Roya turned easily, gracefully entered. She was coolly composed.

"Shall we take the side terrace?" asked Kola.

Roya in no way protested as Kola took her arm and gently guided her to the open doorway to the side terrace. He stood aside and let her precede through, then followed, pulled the terrace doors shut.

"Shall we take the two lounges beside the balustrade?" suggested Kola.

Roya sauntered composedly to one, lazed herself back in it. Kola, smiling in anticipation, sat on the foot of the other lounge. Roya's eyes did not betray their awareness of the location of Kola's knife at his left hip. The black weapon, quickly wielded, could easily reach the black heart.

CHAPTER XLIII

RISSA stood just inside the doorway of Kola's room. The sounds of Kola and Roya coming out onto the side terrace drifted clearly through the high narrow windows at the other end of the room. But Rissa was eyeing Kagi mockingly now. And that individual was grasping the edge of the still-open door as if for support. His narrow features were beaded with a sweat not of physical exertion or of heat. His free hand, as it wiped away the sweat, was trembling. His smile was uncontrollably jerky.

"Well?" purred Rissa pointedly.

Kagi's eyes shifted, his smile sickened, died. He stepped quickly back to the table, grasped up his ax and uneaten half pack of berries, returned and hurried out the doorway, avoiding Rissa's sarcastic smile. She followed, and the door shut. Kagi was hurrying up the corridor. He gave one baleful green glare over his shoulder as he darted into the main room. His footsteps quickly retreated out the foyer and were gone.

Rissa entered her room, the door softly closing behind her as she strode silently toward the windows. She stopped under the opening of one, listened intently to the exchange between her brother and his newest toy.

"—to accept my offer?" said Kola.

"My grandfather is not so well," pointed out Roya, "since the last visit by the patrols of Three."

"Your dear grandfather will be brought up here and given the spare room and all the berries he can eat," said Kola. "And the patrols will be properly dealt with!" But there was a subtle note in Kola's voice that made Rissa sneer.

"And another?" asked Roya.

"Do you care—now?"

"Only that the Great Kola offered it," said Roya.

Kola, the good sport, laughed heartily. "Then never fear, my dear! He may go his way—as long as you are my willing Queen of Sandcliff."

"The Great Kola is indeed most generous and forgiving," complimented Roya with fetching warmth.

"And now. . . ." suggested Kola softly.

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There was an interval of intimate scuffle, then Roya laughing, "But I'm not your Queen yet, Great Kola!"

Kola's laughter was of anticipation.

"After all," purred Roya, "there are rites to perform first, aren't there?"

Kola's happy voice boomed. "And you'll have rites! The best Sandcliff ever saw!"

"Truly, the Great Kola is generous!"

Kola laughed under the flattery. "Ah, but this is just the beginning—Queen Roya! Come, let me take you inside!"

RISSA turned abruptly away from her eavesdropping post. Disdain was curling her full red lips. Her dark eyes were burning the hot flames of jealousy and hate.

"So!" she whispered as she paced the room in tawny movement. "Queen Roya! Queen of Sandcliff! Indeed!"

She paused in front her dressing table, viewed herself in the mirroring disk of black stone. Her exotic features took on an expression of anticipation, her eyes narrowed. She admired herself as she laughed softly in her throat. Then Kola's fist was beating the door.

"Rissa!" he bellowed happily. "Rissa!"

"Coming!" Rissa opened the door and stood in the opening in lovely smiling pose. "Yes, Great Kola?"

Kola put a possessive arm across Roya's shoulders. "The next Queen of Sandcliff!"

"Indeed?" replied Rissa in pleasant surprise. "How nice!"

The two women smiled at each other. Kola apparently did not notice that only their mouths smiled.

"Take Roya here," boomed Kola authoritatively, "and see that she gets properly clothed! The whole works! You have plenty till she gets her own!"

"Why, of course, Great Kola," smiled Rissa. "I'll be glad to let her have an old outfit. The whole works—for Queen Roya!"

"Right!" boomed Kola, missing the sarcasm. "Now I've got work to do!" He winked knowingly at Roya as he gave her a lingering squeeze across the shoulders. "See you later, my pet—after I get Old Walloo up here!"

"Well," exclaimed Rissa as Kola stepped to his own door and pressed the release, "the whole family! How very nice."

"Yeah," laughed Kola as he stepped into his room.

Rissa faced Roya. The two smiled coolly, knowingly.

"Won't you come in?" purred Rissa, stepping aside invitingly.

"Since you don't mind," smiled Roya, entering.

THE door shut itself, and the two women faced each other comparingly. Roya: her long-limbed hunger-lithe tan body scantily attired in mended bits of tattered goatskin; her haloing hair falling unadorned to her straight shoulders; her deep blue eyes intelligently cool, mocking, shrewd; her perfect hunger-shadowed face composed, confident. Rissa: half a head taller; her tawny physical perfection arousingly enhanced by shimmering blue scant apparel; her black fall of hair given additional lights by gemmed tiara and earrings; her black eyes burning, mocking, consummately cunning; her perfect features wearing a faintly derisive smile.

"So," repeated Rissa, "the new Queen of Sandcliff. Queen Roya."

Roya smiled coolly. "Do you mind terribly, Princess?"

Rissa tinkled in sarcasm. "One minds only the Great Kola—as you shall see! But come," stepping to her dressing table, "let's see what we can find to make Queen Roya even more desirable

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to her Great Kola!"

Roya followed and stood idly examining the top of the dressing table as Rissa opened drawers and laid out a slightly worn pair of blue sandals, a set of matching bra and shorts and accessory jewelry.

"Of course," smiled Rissa, straightening up, "the Great Kola will have a much more worthy wardrobe made up for his Queen Roya."

"Two lottery slips," murmured Roya, picking up and examining two brown bits of goatskin.

Rissa snatched them from her, tossed them into an open drawer, rammed the drawer shut. "Your eyes are too good, Queen Roya," she purred.

"Kola and Kagi," mused Roya. "And each one's name written in the other's hand."

"You are here to dress for the Great Kola," pointed out Rissa with an acid smile.

"Oh, so I am!" replied Roya with sweet sarcasm as she began slipping off her tattered attire.

CHAPTER XLIV

"WOULD you care to try a bath?" purred Rissa insinuatingly. "The urn of bathing water is still half full."

"Oh, then you don't use it often!" smiled Roya innocently. As Rissa's cheeks flamed, Roya took up two large swabs of woolly white goatskin from the dressing table, went to the large urn beside the dressing table, dipped the washskin in and began a leisurely bathing. The conversation was equally leisurely, but thinly clothed.

"I hear a patrol on One was stabbed," purred Rissa, lazing against the dressing table.

"What a pity," smiled Roya, dipping the washskin again.

"In the back too."

"How cowardly!" observed Roya without looking up.

"Isn't it!" mocked Rissa.

"Any other news?" baited Roya, drying.

"I, of course, don't know everything."

"No," observed Roya, smilingly, dipping the washskin again, "I don't suppose you do— now—up here."

"In that case," purred Rissa, "perhaps you could inform us."

"Perhaps."

"Such as where Toka is?"

Roya did not so much as pause in bathing her leg. "I, of course, don't know everything either."

"But I know where Toka is."

"Then you can tell Kola." Roya mocked the bested Rissa with a smile, dipped the washskin in the urn.

Rissa's cheeks were hot flame. Her breasts rose and fell in anger. In tawny swiftness she was back of Roya, had grasped Roya's hair in both hands, was stepping back and yanking savagely. Roya sprawled awkwardly, fell backward to the floor with a cry, clawed at the jealous-strong hands in her hair. Rissa, long well-fed on berries, was screaming triumphantly as she viciously jerked, savagely wrenched and dragged the floundering Roya backward. The foot of Roya's flailing leg struck the urn. The vessel crashed, flooded over her and over Rissa's feet and ankles. Rissa was laughing hysterically now as she dragged Roya about the room. Roya, borne always backward, could gain no foothold. She sprawled helplessly, struggled, kept grasping, kicking and clawing, but succeeded only in crashing over the chairs, the lounge.

Roya suddenly made a frenzied exertion, caught Rissa's ankles, yanked viciously. Rissa crashed atop her, but Rissa still gripped Roya's hair as relentlessly as ever. Roya's hands clawed

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madly at Rissa, ripped at her royal attire, shredded it away with desperate ferocity till there was nothing, nothing more to grasp but Rissa's hair. Roya's fingers, strong from work, then swiftly wound deep into the black tresses, wrenched. The jewels in the hair scattered, and Rissa's eyes were as watery, her features as twisted with pain, as Roya's. But Rissa would not let go. Teeth grinding savage determination, she continued to jerk, wrench, yank. But Roya was locked to her in just as vicious attempts. They flailed with legs, kicked with knees and feet, beat with their elbows, crashed over furniture bruisingly till their naked bodies were stung red from shoulders to feet. They finally lay under the windows, panting in exhaustion, yet neither's grip loosening the slightest.

"Well," rasped Kola amusedly, "getting tired already? Perhaps a few berries would help!"

ROYA gasped, let go Rissa's hair, as did Rissa of Roya's. The heads of both whirled toward the door. Kola was lounging in the open doorway, a loose grin on his coarse features. Roya vainly fluttered to try to cover her flushing shame as she scrambled up, darted down behind a chair. However, Rissa, as disheveled as Roya, unashamedly leaped up with the stone fire holder in her hand and hurled it at Kola. He warded it easily with a swing of his ax.

"Get out!" raged Rissa. She grasped up a candle holder.

Kola stepped out the doorway with a humorously warning, "No more playing now, girls—till I get back!"

The candle holder smashed on the closing door. Kola's mocking laughter trailed out the foyer.

Roya stood up and eyed Rissa. The two faced each other some two paces apart. The attire of one was now no more than that of the other. The degree of damage was also equal. Rissa cooled to shrewdness.

"We both may as well bathe and dress now." She turned to the dressing table, laid out an additional outfit for herself. "Then," she paused, "you can straighten up this place." She took up a comb and began unknotting her hair preparatory to bathing.

Roya stepped up beside Rissa, took up another of Rissa's combs and began using it to clear her hair. "The Queen," she reminded softly, "is not the servant of the Princess."

Rissa only smiled as she took up a washskin and a drying skin, dipped the washskin in the bit of water that somehow was yet in the intact bottom of the urn, and began bathing. "The Queen will learn much. Very much—soon."

CHAPTER XLV

KOLA strode east on Twenty-five. "Split Lip! Scar Belly!" he bellowed.

The two, fully armed, quickly appeared. "Yeah, Chief?"

"Go down to—"

Big Snake roaring, enthused thumpings, a tremendous splintering, the crashing and wrenching of stone, interrupted. Sandcliff rocked.

Kola was at the balustrade, his gaze sweeping down to the first terrace, the Big Snakes. A larger group of the monsters was a continuous procession carrying huge sods and uprooted trees up from the nearby jungle depths and spreading them in a large rectangular mass centrally abutting the base of Sandcliff. But the wrenching and rocking were from the Big Snakes' directors, the three terrifically huge spike-backs, which now had huge maws clenched on the crown ends of great palms and were attacking the first terrace. Backing off

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and taking a running start, they leaped up, swung the huge palms club-like and smashed away at the first terrace balustrade. The huge bole ends of the palms were wicked in their devastation. And the attack was continuous; one, then another of the huge spike-backs, in relays, bashing away long sections of the balustrade, smashing the first terrace elevator booms loose, blasting the stacked ladders flying. The continuous procession, bringing up sods and trees and spreading them, roared approval, exhortingly thumped their great tails.

"Drummers!" roared Kola. "Clear the first terrace!"

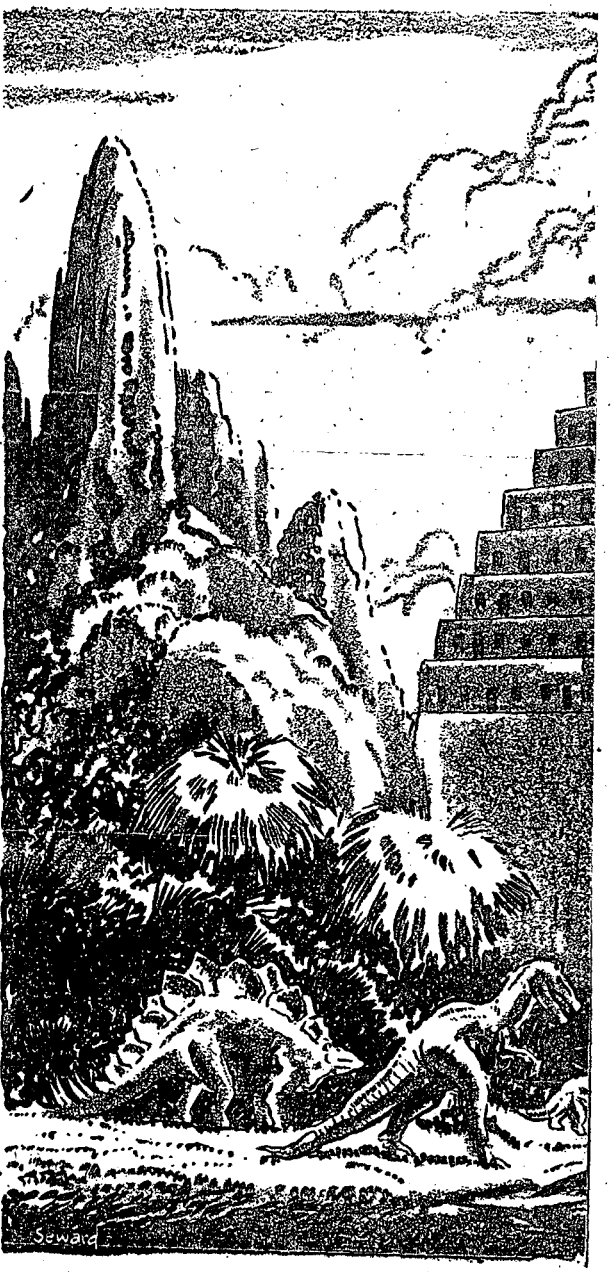
The great drum throbbed the unnecessary message. With fearful backward glances, the first terrace populace and patrols and burly warriors on duty were alike scurrying to even higher terraces; the able of terraces Two and Three, and the disabled who had someone to assist them, were likewise clearing to safer heights. The populaces of every terrace above were at the balustrades, uneasily watching the Big Snakes.

The first terrace balustrade and elevators and booms were at last smashed away, and the three huge attackers trotted back and critically surveyed the damage. They were evidently pleased with the preliminary results. The other Big Snakes appeared equally pleased as they continued to bring up huge sods and trees and systematically spread them on what was now evidently to be an incline to the first terrace, an incline at right angles and solid and wide enough to accommodate two Big Snakes side by side. The cunning structure was slowly but steadily rising, slanting up against the sheer rise to terrace One. The incline was in layers: a layer of sods, a layer of trees, one atop the other, and as each new layer was spread, several Big Snakes tramped it solidly down.

KOLA'S face was a thundercloud as he turned from the balustrade of Twenty-five. He seemed not to see Split Lip and Scar Belly.

"You want us to do something, Chief?" asked Scar Belly.

"Just come along and be ready,"



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growled Kola as he strode back toward One on Twenty-five.

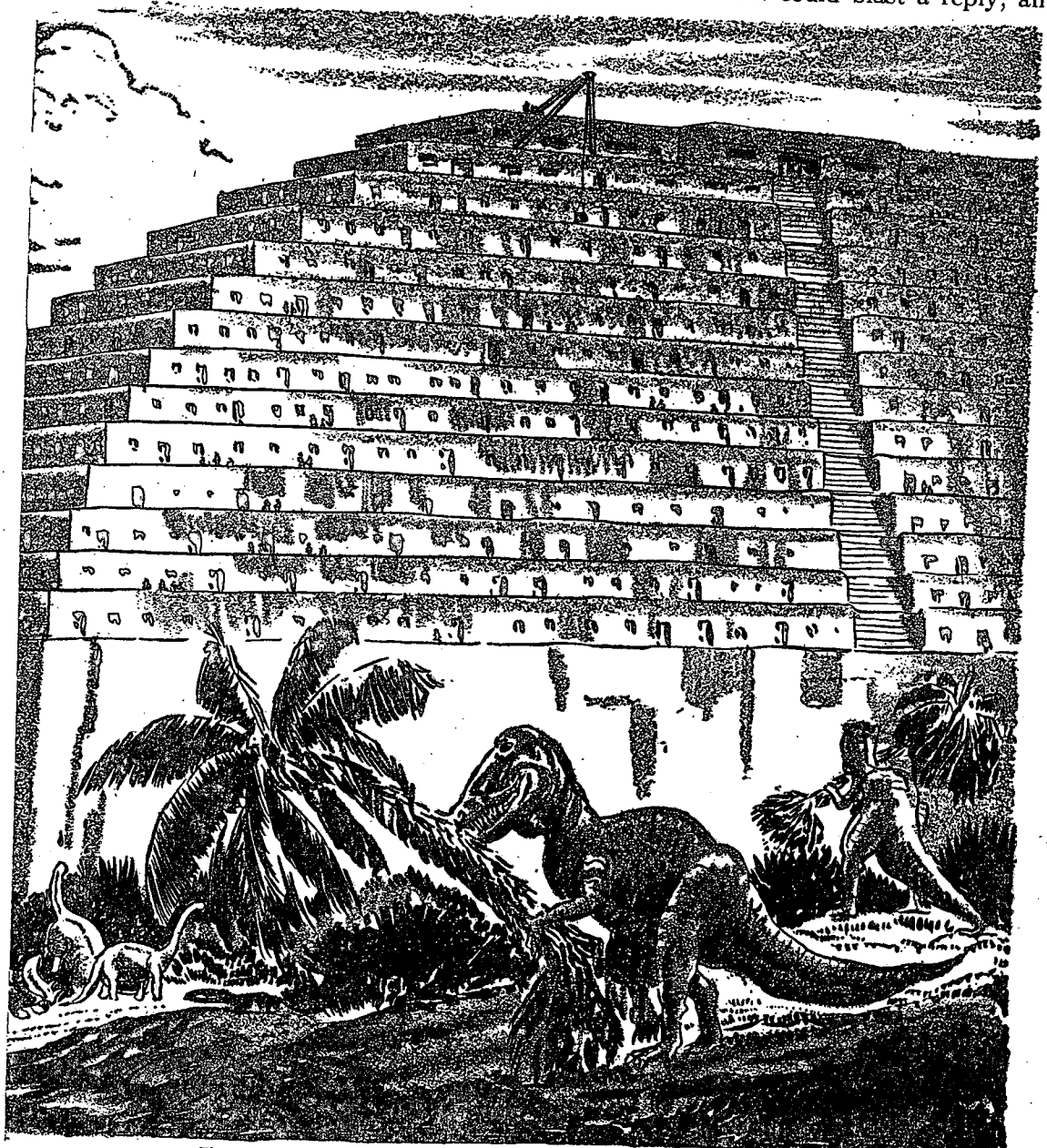
Kagi, strong with recent berry gorging, fully armed and flanked by powerful escorts, was just turning away from the section of balustrade in front Two on Twenty-five as Kola, obediently trailed by Scar Belly and Split Lip, came near.

"Well," snarled Kola sarcastically, stopping and idly swinging his huge battle-ax, "nice party we're having down there!"

Kagi's pair of escorts were expressionless. So were Split Lip and Scar Belly, two flanking paces behind Kola.

Kagi's smile was smooth and sure. "That was sure a nice job last night, Chief."

Before Kola could blast a reply, an



The Big Snakes used palm trees to smash at the first terrace defenders

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exclamation burst from the others watching the Big Snakes. Kola stepped to the balustrade. Kagi turned to also look. The Big Snakes were still bringing up the sods and trees and spreading them and tramping them down. The incline was growing. But again was enacted what had caused the exclamations: the incline was cleared of trampers, and a huge spike-back raced up the growing structure, leaped for the first terrace, succeeded only in cutting his snapping jaws on the jagged stubs of the balustrade, slid back onto the incline and trotted away.

The patrols and forces of warriors anxiously looked up to Twenty-five for guidance, received none. Kola's attention was momentarily on Rissa and Roya who had suddenly appeared on the projecting terrace in front of One on Twenty-five and who were standing watching the wild scene. Roya, like Rissa, was now royally attired in the striking scant costume of iridescent cobalt-blue. Her beauty was shown in fetching breathlessness. She seemed to stiffen, pale at the sight she beheld. Kola smiled to himself. The populace of Sandcliff, even his own men in but scant higher confident degree, uneasily eyed Kola, waited. He turned back to the Big Snakes. His face became a snarling cloud.

"Better have your little lottery, Chief," suggested Kagi. His green eyes were coldly shrewd, his smile small, thin.

Lips curling, Kola shot him a hot, mocking glare. "Lottery, Kagi?"

"What you want, isn't it, Chief?" Kagi's eyes flicked over Split Lip and Scar Belly.

Kola's eyes narrowed. He swung his battle-ax, easily, warningly. And it was as if a surge of terrific tension suddenly swept Twenty-five. Kola, with a mocking sneer, lithely shifted around to where his terrace began projecting, to face east, and so only Rissa and Roya were at his back. Split Lip and Scar Belly as lithely moved with him, were almost too casually one on either side. Kagi, equally sure of mien, had shifted away and clear of the balustrade, faced Kola. The expressionless pair of escorts likewise postured themselves. Kagi and company formed a convex semicircle facing Kola, Split Lip and Scar Belly. In the shade given by the awnings, the eyes of all were bright, keen, ready. Behind Kagi and company the rest of Twenty-five shifted. There, too, battle-axes were glinting, hands twitching on knive hilts, berry-strong bodies tensing. The women were unnoticeably filtering back until only men, in separating groups, formed the immediate scene. Kagi and Kola were smiling awarely, narrowly eyeing each other. Each was apparently aware that previous schemes and counterschemes had now been cancelled by events.

"Perhaps," rasped Kola softly, but so all could hear, "we won't need a lottery."

"Perhaps," replied Kagi easily.

"You have a suggestion, Kagi?" mocked Kola.

AS KAGI hesitated, darted his eyes ever so slightly to Split Lip and Scar Belly, Kola sprang, ax flashing, but deadly so. Split Lip and Scar Belly had timed with Kola and were in action too. Kagi's escorts were a fraction late, went down under neatly calculated grazing blows on their jaws from the knobbed ax heads of Split Lip and Scar Belly. Kagi, quick of reflex, parried Kola's first move, whirled to scurry back into the others of Twenty-five. Kola was ragingly after him, had him by the ax arm, yanked him back, flashed battle-ax warningly at the rest of Twenty-five, gestured back the

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eager Split Lip and Scar Belly who were standing over the escorts.

Kagi, momentarily feigning limpness, was suddenly whirling, shifted his battle-ax to other hand, flashed the weapon and sliced Kola's thigh to the bone. But amazingly not more than a few drops of blood spilled; almost instantly the wound was closing; Kola was saturated with the strange strength and healing power of the black water berries. He held Kagi off, easily parried Kagi's flashing battle-ax, roared in mocking laughter.

"Come on!" hysterically screamed Kagi to the others on Twenty-five. "This is it! Get him! Get—"

Kola's hand closed on Kagi's throat, the other hand dropped the huge battle-ax, wrenched Kagi's battle-ax free, hurled it far over the balustrade. The other men of Twenty-five relaxed, milled back together at a safe distance; for Kagi was not only limp, but purple of face, symbol of Kola's domination, his smashing of the intrigue against him. Kola roared in mocking laughter, let Kagi slump to the terrace. Split Lip and Scar Belly had relaxed, still stood over the escorts sprawled near Kagi's doorway.

Kola turned to retrieve his battle-ax and Kagi suddenly was not limp or purple-visaged. Battle-knife drawn, narrow features writhing, he was leaping for Kola's broad back. Rissa's scream sliced the air. Kola instantly dropped, twisting sidewise, but Kagi's knife bared one of Kola's ribs to the bone. In a flash Kola had the knife arm, was on his feet, spraddled, bellowing rage. He had the knife arm in both huge hands. His great muscles flexed. A snap, and Kagi was screaming in pain, his arm awry between elbow and wrist, his knife skidding away.

Kola held the wildly flailing, struggling, screaming Kagi aloft by one ankle, roared in gory challenging laughter at the others of Twenty-five. Kola's thigh wound was healed with only a faint and sound scar to show; his rib wound was closing amazingly. Still holding Kagi aloft in one huge hand, battle-ax in other, he leaped onto the balustrade, was a commanding spectacle under the awning edge that was a full height above his head.

"Drummers!" he roared.

Those two individuals already had white staring faces on Kola. "Yes, Great Kola!"

"All Sandcliff! All Sandcliff!" The great drum was throbbing Kola's words. "See the double-crossing rat!"

ALL EYES, especially those of the patrols and powerful warriors, were on the screaming Kagi as he writhed, flailed vainly in Kola's grip. Even the Big Snakes paused in their feverish activity to watch. With all the watching a silence came over the scene. In it Kagi's screams, his hysterical pleadings were shrill, sharp and clear, blood-chilling. Kola roared in laughter, began to swing his victim in accelerating circles overhead. Kagi's screaming increased as the revolving increased, rose to a soul-piercing pitch as he became a blur over Kola's hairless head. Then suddenly Kagi was soaring, legs kicking, arms flailing, far out from Twenty-five, out and down, head over feet, down, down, screaming toward the gleefully watching Big Snakes.

The monsters, great maws gaping vengefully, converged toward the plummeting Kagi. As all Sandcliff watched in horrored silence, Kagi plunged into a mass of snapping mouths, and became no more than red stains on angrily gnashing teeth. Sandcliff gasped in shock. Kola roared in insane delight. He seemed not to sense the portent of Kagi's manner of extinction. He turned

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on the others of Twenty-five.

"Well," he bellowed in mocking challenge, "anyone else want to run Sandcliff?"

Only respectful silence.

Kola turned down to the terraces below. "All right down there, you drumming rats! Twice! Anyone else want to run Sandcliff?"

The drum throbbed the challenge twice. Kola stood on the balustrade and eyed the terraces tauntingly, the groups of patrols and warriors especially. He threw back his head and roared insane laughter. He turned back to see Kagi's escorts, alertly watched by Split Lip and Scar Belly, coming to, sitting up, rubbing their stout jaws where the knobbed heads of battle-axes had expertly grazed. Kola stepped down easily from the balustrade.

"Well," he roared at the escorts, "wake up!"

In a daze, the pair struggled up, stood respectful.

"Whose side you on?" snarled Kola.

"Side?" blankly asked one. He looked at his partner.

"Yeah!" roared Kola. "Side! Who you with? Me or Kagi?"

"Why," exclaimed one heartily, "yours, of course, Great Kola!"

"Whose else?" exclaimed the other, equally hearty.

Kola roared in mockery. "Good boys! Now keep it up and you'll keep getting your berries!"

The ex-Kagi's escorts cagily sidled away.

"Give them back their axes and knives!" directed Kola to Split Lip and Scar Berry.

The escorts received their weapons with a "Thanks, Chief!" They exemplified the others who had swayed away toward Kagi.

Kola grinned at Split Lip and Scar Belly. "Good job, boys! Hundred berries apiece!"

"Thanks, Chief!" Split Lip and Scar Belly swelled with pride.

CHAPTER XLVI

KOLA looked over the balustrade, scowled as he saw the Big Snakes still feverishly building the incline. He spat a string of curses, whirled back to Split Lip and Scar Belly.

"Down to the court and throw Scar Face to them!"

The pair hesitated an instant in wonder.

"Well?" roared Kola in challenge.

"Right, Chief!" They grasped up their axes, whirled away to the west stairway.

Kola stood at the balustrade watching, as were the others of Twenty-five. A handful of moments, and Split Lip and Scar Belly were out on Twenty-four, directly below, with the body of Scar Face. Split Lip had the ankles, Scar Belly the wrists.

"Heave him away!" roared Kola impatiently.

Split Lip and Scar Belly began swinging the body, back and out, back and out, in increasing momentum. A final maximum heave and they let go. The body soared out from Twenty-four, out and down, grotesquely limp, flopping, plummeting toward converging Big Snakes. The Big Snakes massed with gnashing maws and the body of Scar Face dropped into the vengeful melee. There was more blood spatters on Big Snake lips, teeth, snouts. The monsters roared, turned unsated back to their feverish building efforts.

Kola seemed at last somewhat aware of future difficulties. He gripped the balustrade till his great hands were white. His lips curled, he rasped not-too-confident laughter, cursed. Then a maniacal light came into his eyes. He

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whirled on the watching ones of Twenty-five.

"Well, what are you all gawking about?" he raged. "They can't get us up here! They'll have to get the others first!"

His listeners seemed to take on confidence at this reminder.

"I'll load your bellies with berries and we'll kill the whole mess! What are you afraid of!" He roared in wild laughter. "Go on! Get ready for a time! You're getting a new Queen!" As knowing smiles and glances were exchanged, he leaned over the balustrade. "You drumming rats! Keep it going! All hail Kola's Queen Roya!"

The drummers leaped, the drum throbbed. All oppressed of Sandcliff gazed up in awe, puzzlement, despair, toward One on Twenty-five and the golden-haired girl beside the balustrade.

Roya, previously as if transfixed by horror, suddenly stepped back, put her face in her hands and began crying. Kola was to her in two long strides, a drunken grin curling away from his teeth, a wild low laugh in his throat. He took her by the arm.

"No time to be crying now!" he mocked.

"Gramps—Old Walloo!" protested Roya.

KOLA only mocked her with a coarse laugh, forced her to the balustrade for all to see. Roya calmed, dried her eyes, straightened up in cold statuesque, her blond beauty brilliant in the shadowed sunlight.

"Up on the balustrade!" urged Kola. "Let them see you!" He leaned his ax against the balustrade. Placing both hands around her slim waist, he raised the expressionless girl onto the balustrade, leaped up beside her, his right arm about her.

"Come on!" he bellowed to the watchers. "Hail your Queen!"

The hails came, a mixture: unwilling, mocking, derisive, respectful, envious. Roya remained impervious, staring into space, white of face, composed of mouth.

"Well," laughed Kola, "how do you like your rites!"

"These are not the marriage rites," replied Roya coldly.

"They are if I say so!" reminded Kola.

He roared in wild laughter as she suddenly twisted away, dropped back onto the terrace, attempted to dodge away from him. He caught her by an arm. And she was no longer composed, resilient as she whirled, snatched out Kola's knife and, screaming, drove its glistening blackness for his heart. But his hand was like a striking reptile as it caught the knife wrist, twisted cruelly. The others on Twenty-five laughed in enjoyment as Roya screamed in pain, dropped the knife, which Kola promptly retrieved and sheathed. Still gripping Roya's wrist, he yanked her to him. She clawed, kicked, struggled with her might, but Kola roughly embraced her, kissed her, again and again, as Twenty-five cheered.

One of Roya's hands worked free, found the knife hilt again. As Rissa and the other women screamed and the men shouted, Roya flashed the knife to Kola's great chest in search of his black heart. The gleaming length of vicious midnight bit, but only shallowly, evidently into a huge rib, stuck, vibrated. Kola was roaring with rage as he hurled Roya from him. She crashed, crying in frustration, to the terrace. Kola pulled his knife from his chest, sheathed it again. He stood over Roya, stooped, yanked her up by a shoulder, laughed mockingly into her tear-streaming face.

"We'll play!" he leered. "Inside—soon!" He hurled her into the foyer

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of One on Twenty-five, turned back to the balustrade, retrieved his ax, leaned over the balustrade, ordered Split Lip and Scar Belly back up, then, "Drummers! All patrols and warriors to Twenty-four at once! Berries for all!"

The drum throbbed the message. The summoned were instantly hurrying up from the terraces, thrusting the ordinary populace viciously out of the way.

Roya was just struggling dazedly up as Kola strode into the foyer. He caught her up by a wrist, yanked her up to tiptoe.

"All right!" he snarled. "Now come on!" He dragged her; she struggling silently, vainly, face in agony.

Rissa, beside the huge center table of the main room, stood watching with a mocking smile as Kola and his frantic prize disappeared into the corridor.

KOLA stopped at the open door of the first room. He slammed the door wide, threw Roya in, laughed as she sprawled to the floor. He pulled the door shut, reached up to a locking masonry to the left of the door, then reached to a second locking masonry to the right of the door.

He turned and bellowed back up the corridor to Rissa, "Send Split Lip and Scar Belly in when they come!" then strode on down the corridor to the door of his room, opened it, strode in. As the door closed he tossed his ax onto the table, went to the goat's eyes, pressed. He stepped into the vault, began tossing out packs of berries, counting them as quickly as he tossed. There was a knock on the door.

"Who's there?" he rasped.

"Split Lip! Scar Belly!" came the answers.

"Wait!" Kola quickly threw out more packs of berries till there was a huge heap near the table in the center of the room.

Kola then stepped out of the vault, shut the half of wall, strode to let in Split Lip and Scar Belly, popped a chair to the door to hold it open. The pair of arrivals gaped at the pile of packs of berries, half again higher than Kola.

"All right!" rasped Kola, ripping open a pack for himself. "Start carrying them out and handing them around! There's a full pack for every man!"

"Right, Chief!" The pair leaned their axes against the wall and began loading their arms high with the packs.

"If you birds want a little something extra for yourselves," suggested Kola with a sly smile as the pair prepared to depart with the first load, "try finding the vault of Kagi's apartment. It's all yours."

His pair grinned, "Thanks, Chief! But after we get this little job done for you!"

"Handle it right," said Kola, "and there'll be more."

The pair left in high spirits. Kola half-sat on the table, munched berries, heard the appreciative shouts from those outside. Rissa suddenly appeared in the open doorway.

"Come in, Princess!" he hailed her.

She entered, stood beside the pile of packs, eyed them, eyed her brother. "Got a little more than you cut for last night, didn't you?"

"Why do you think I did the job?"

"No one else could."

Kola grinned. "Only makes it easier to get certain rats out of the way."

"And after the Big Snakes have them all?"

"Well?"

"This time," pointed Rissa, "the Big Snakes are out for more than just something to play ball with."

Kola grunted with confidence. "Me and the boys will be waiting for the crazy things—if they ever get up this far."

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SPLIT LIP and Scar Belly were back. They nodded at Rissa, silently set to reloading their arms with the packs of berries.

"All our boys up on Twenty-four yet?" asked Kola of them.

"All there and waiting, Chief!" answered Split Lip.

"Better put a couple of lookouts back on the wall," directed Kola. "One to each elevator recess."

"Right, Chief!" responded Scar Belly. He and Split Lip left with another huge load each.

"I thought Toka was coming in to you!" mocked Rissa.

"Nothing like a little welcoming committee," grinned Kola.

"He's not too dumb, you know."

"Oh, your little pet rat will show up," mocked Kola. "He'll want to see what I'm doing to his fair Roya."

Rissa's eyes burned black hate, her cheeks flushed red jealousy. Kola laughed in enjoyment.

"Play with your pretty women while you can," purred Rissa. "She won't be pretty long!"

Kola only rocked with laughter as Rissa whirled out of the room, up the corridor and into her own room.

Kola still half-sat on the table and munched berries. He could not leave until Split Lip and Scar Belly had carried out and distributed all the packs. Meantime his thoughts dwelled on Roya. He smiled in anticipation, his opaque blue eyes flamed a wild light.

CHAPTER XLVII

UP IN the aerie, Toka was awake with the first Big Snake attack, his eyes searching down over the aerie rim. But his view was not sufficient to take in the first terrace, but only a little closer in than the rocky upcropping, which, disturbingly, seemed to have been marked by Big Snake maulings. Toka was not less disturbed at the procession bringing up huge sods and uprooted trees toward the center of Sandcliff, at the three huge attacking spikebacks, tremendous palms club-like in maws, as they ran back for running starts for Sandcliff, at the following crashings. Toka knew the first terrace would be in ruins; no ladders or elevators. That had not been in The Plan, nor had this madness of the Big Snakes. More last moment revisions to make!

Toka saw the wall was completely clear of lookouts, the sky clear. He ground his teeth in vexation. Storm! What storm?

His mind fighting for the answer, his heart recklessly urging with concern for Roya, Toka was tempted. But he crouched down, picked up a water plant, bit into its coolness, sucked it dry, tossed it down, pondered further. He picked off a rock, large as a man's head, from the aerie edge, hefted it thoughtfully, replaced it. Was he really unwatched now? Kola had enough men to spare. Toka waited, heard the great drum throbbing its messages.

Toka went cold, rigid as he suddenly heard the message with Roya's name. Queen of Sandcliff! Kola's Queen Roya!

Toka's jaws snapped. He was over the back side of the aerie, sliding, dropping, leaping, expertly guiding his plummeting descent down the almost sheer, concealing back of the pinnacle. Taking advantage of every shielding ridge and defile, every shadow cast by rocky obstructions in the way of the bright sun, he swiftly worked his way around forward toward the door boulder to Kola's secret stairway to the Topland. As he neared he kept a lookout for rough fist-size rocks, found four that satisfied him, cradled them in his left arm.

Toka was almost to the boulder now, just in back of the low boulder-strewn

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ridge forming one shoulder of the defile in which the entrance was set. He carefully dodged over the ridge, down into the narrow defile, came down on the left of the boulder, darted in behind the towering rock just in front of the boulder, flattening against the rock and listened a moment. No warning outcry, no sound but the occasional rattle of goats' hooves on rock, the low bleating, and beyond the wall the raucous chorus of shouts and babblings from the terraces, also a lower keyed muttering from the terraces, that bore an anxious, uneasy note.

Toka stepped to the door boulder, and remembering the lack of mechanism upon his coming out, pressed his right hand against the right side of the boulder. It gave in easily, silently. Toka stepped into the opening, listened. No warning sound.

TOKA hesitated a moment in sudden thought. Though Roya probably was in Kola's hands, rash action toward Kola now might be ruinous. Toka had a further thought. If it were right, then Kola was indeed cleverer than had been thought possible. Yes. Roya—as bait— But why waste this time in waiting?

Toka followed the passage toward the court, to the black door across the passage. He remembered the mechanism from his previous visit when he had been following Kagi. The black door was swiftly behind him, shut. He was down the stairway, had the seeming dead end beyond the stairway open; then it closed behind him.

Toka was now in an unfamiliar continuation of passage, to another black door. He pressed his ear to it, listened. Only the sounds, very muffled, out on terrace Twenty-four. Toka searched for the actuating masonry of this door, found it. He tensed as the door swung in toward him, then relaxed slightly as he saw the small room that must be just back of Kola's throne.

With one quick glance at the huge empty red lottery urn and six slightly smaller urns containing unused slips of brown wool-free goatskin, in a row along the east wall, Toka was across to the heavy blue drapes and carefully peering through a tiny part. The court was apparently empty. Its black doors to terrace Twenty-four were closed. The coarse laughing and talking out on Twenty-four filtered in, muffled.

Toka stepped back from the drape, turned and eyed the huge lottery urn and the six smaller ones. He carefully put down his four rocks near the west wall, stepped to the lottery urn, rolled it out from the wall, looked down into its depths. Empty, smooth.

Toka frowned, looked again into the lottery urn, turned it to let the glow from the ceiling and walls light its depth. Nothing. But Toka knew there was some trick to this urn, something that made it possible for Kola to have any name drawn on each lottery. Anyone was free to examine the urn at the start of every drawing, see that it was empty. And when the slips and sticks of chalk were passed out to the prospective victims, the slips signed and recollected, only the slips that had been signed were dumped into the urn; the rest remained untouched in the smaller urns. Everyone could see that the lottery was "fair." But few thought it was that.

Toka further eyed the huge urn reflectively. Then on a sudden impulse he lifted it up, turned it upside down, shook it. Nothing. He'd hardly expected anything. He set the urn back down, stepped to one after another of the other urns, grabbed up handfuls of the slips. The slips were clear of any writing, perfectly clean. Toka

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carefully replaced the slips, returned his attention to the lottery urn. He tapped his fingers lightly down its sides, upended the vessel, tapped the bottom. Nothing. He set the urn upright again.

Toka ran his fingers around the wide neck and mouth of the urn, outside, then inside, let his fingers search down around, inside, up against the symmetrical shoulders of the urn. His mind leaped as his fingers revealed a precisely formed inward bulge, where there was nothing on the outside of the shoulder to indicate the slightest irregularity in their lines.

Toka's fingers quickly felt it out. The bulge took up one quarter of the circumference of the shoulder and was as deep. It had an equally long opening on the side toward the mouth of the urn, an opening one finger wide. Toka knew he had the answer to the urn. A slip planted, the blindfolded drawer easily finding it. And the drawer, of course, was always one of Kola's followers. Toka's fingers swiftly searched the interior of the bulge, felt a fold of goatskin. His fingers closed, had it out. He examined it. A name on it, course.

It was Roya.

Toka was rocked. He blinked, frowned. Roya's name, in a feminine hand—but not Roya's hand!

Toka's mind meshed, and his jaw snapped, his eyes blazed black. He placed the slip into his waist ring, rolled the huge urn back into place, gathered up his rocks, stepped to the door back into the passage, had it open and was swiftly on his way. He paused at the passage turn where the invisible door panel was. He left open the door to the stairway to the Topland, then stole swiftly to the passage door that opened into the corridor of Kola's apartment. Toka listened at the door, heard Kola and Split Lip and Scar Belly as the latter two carried out more packs of the strength-giving berries.

Toka settled down and waited.

CHAPTER XLVIII

SPLIT LIP and Scar Belly were gathering up the last of the packs of berries in Kola's room.

"Okay, boys!" rasped Kola. He stood up, crumpled and tossed aside the lead of the pack he'd eaten. "I'll take your axes out for you!"

"Thanks, Chief!" as, arms piled high, they went out the door.

Kola took up his own ax from the table, stepped to the north wall and took up Split Lip's and Scar Belly's, then kicked aside the chair that was holding open the door and strode out and up the corridor, through the main room, out the foyer and onto terrace Twenty-five. He glanced sharply east along Twenty-five. His powerful key men were in attitudes of relaxation, half-sitting on the balustrade or sprawling in lounges and munching their berries. Some of their slaves stood in statuesque positions beside the doorways, others were tending to their master's whims. The remarks between Kola's men and their glittering women was sharp, easy, confident.

Kola smiled, stepped to the balustrade of his projecting section of the terrace, shot his gaze down into the valley just below Sandcliff. The Big Snakes were still feverishly building the incline, the structure steadily, systematically growing. Occasionally the Big Snakes rumbled and tossed wicked glances of anticipation up at their objective. Kola grunted, brought his gaze back up to Twenty-four, along the terrace. Split Lip and Scar Belly, near the west stairway, were the center of a happily ribald, mildly milling group. Elsewhere along Twenty-four, Kola's thousand-odd warriors and patrols were

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resting as they munched berries. As on Twenty-five, black battle-axes glinted in rest, the hilts of battle-knives reflected the light.

The other people of Sandcliff were hurriedly crowding toward the higher terraces. Those unable to move under their own power were being helped or carried by the more able of their friends or family. Terraces One to Sixteen were already completely deserted. Terrace Twenty-three, evacuated by Kola's men, was becoming massed with the oppressed. Longing, anxious, desperate faces were being turned upward to Twenty-four and Twenty-five, up toward the Topland.

Kola's lips curled mockingly. He turned from the balustrade, strode east, swinging his own ax in one hand, Split Lip and Scar Belly's in the other. On his way he smiled, grunted and nodded acknowledgment of the warm greetings of his men and their women. All was supreme confidence. Kola stopped at the west landing area, looked up at the lookout, who was munching berries as he kept the alert on the back wall of the west elevator recess.

"See him yet?" bellowed Kola.

Without turning his eyes from the Topland, the lookout called back, "Not a sign of him yet, Chief!"

KOLA grunted, turned out to the west stairway landing, leaned on the balustrade and watched Split Lip and Scar Belly complete the distribution of the packs of berries. A pack each left over for themselves, they ripped them open and began eating.

"Okay!" rasped Kola down to them, causing them to crane upward. "Now come up here a minute!"

"Right, Chief!" Packs carefully held, they whirled and bounded up the west stairway and stood grinning after Kola had handed them their axes.

"What else, Chief?" asked Scar Belly, like Split Lip, mouthing a handfull of berries.

"Everybody get a pack?" rasped Kola, eyeing them narrowly.

"One pack to every man of us, Chief!" said Split Lip.

"You sure counted them right to a man, Chief!" complimented Scar Belly.

Kola grinned under the flattery, then rasped, "The rats downstairs are liable to get some crazy idea and try rushing Twenty-four. Tip the boys to be ready for anything."

"Right, Chief."

"Split Lip, you take Twenty-four. Scar Belly, Twenty-five."

"Right, Chief."

"And," added Kola with a sneer, "tell the lads to use their own methods."

Split Lip and Scar Belly swallowed berries, grinned knowingly. "Right, Chief."

Mouthing another handful of berries, Scar Belly strode away on Twenty-five as Split Lip bounded down the stairway and began covering Twenty-four.

Kola eyed the Big Snakes again, their growing incline. The structure was at least halfway up the first rise. Kola sneered, turned back onto Twenty-five. A thick smile of anticipation on his arrogant face, a wild light in his opaque blue eyes, he strode back toward One on Twenty-five.

CHAPTER XLIX

AS HE heard Kola stride up the corridor after Split Lip and Scar Belly, Toka laid down his four rocks, felt for the release of the door from the passage into the corridor. His sensitive fingers swiftly discovered it in the left door casing, and the door swung in toward him. Toka had his rocks, one in the hand of his ready right arm. He peeked up the corridor. Clear. All doors except

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the pair to the main room were closed.

Again laying his four rocks on the floor of the passage, Toka leaped, lit silently on the opposite side of the corridor, and the passage door stayed open, ready for any swift retreat. Moving swiftly, Toka opened Kola's door, leaped in as the door swung wide, and the door stayed open. Keeping one ear cocked on the babble from out on the terraces, he had Kola's vault open, was in, was out with two huge coils of stout rope on each arm, a pack of berries in each hand. He had the vault closed, was silently out the door, letting it shut. He laid the packs of berries in the open passage, then was stealing up the corridor, into the main room. From well within the room he peered out through the foyer. No one was in sight, the projecting end of the terrace seemed deserted. He then checked the side terrace. Empty.

Toka moved swiftly, surely, hid one coil of rope under each of four lounges of the main room, then was silently back into the corridor. He listened intently at the first door. Silence. He listened with equal intensity at the second door—Rissa's. There was a slight movement within, as of one person.

Toka was back at the first door, the room wherein Kola must have imprisoned Roya—if he had. Toka ran swift hands in search, found the catch, but the door did not so much as creak under his pushing hands. He knew there must be other releases. He ran feverish hands in search. He found a second, and the door swung in, to reveal an apprehensive Roya, backed under the windows at the far end of the room. She straightened up with a glad gasp at the sight of him. He put a finger to his lips, motioned her quickly to him, steadied her out into the corridor, and the door shut. He reset the two locking masonries.

"Not a sound," he breathed in Roya's ear. "Quick. Into the passage!"

Roya was away down the corridor with a backward glance of anxiety and wonderment over her shoulder. She stepped into the passage, held the door open and watched Toka. Toka had paused in front of Rissa's door, was carefully placing the lottery slip bearing Roya's name on the corridor floor there. Toka heard Kola's step in the foyer, and was down the corridor and into the passage. The passage door shut just before Kola entered the corridor.

"Toka," breathed Roya, "what is it all about?"

He gestured her silent, pressed his ear to the passage door, was tense as he heard Kola pause and move the catches of the door of the first room.

"So!" rasped Kola. "Hiding on me, eh? Want to play?" His low laughter was cut short as the door of the first room closed.

Roya looked up into Toka's face. Her eyes were glowing, loving, grateful. Her arms went around his neck. Her lips met his equally eager ones. Toka's mind reeled into sweet heaven.

THEN Kola was bursting out the first room and into the corridor. Toka and Roya separated. Toka grasped up his rocks, handed the packs of berries to Roya, then together they stood tense, listening. Kola's fist was beating on Rissa's door. Kola was muttering something, then was roaring curses as Rissa opened her door.

"Explain this!" roared Kola.

"Explain what?" snapped Rissa.

"This lottery slip with Roya's name on it!" raged Kola. "In your handwriting!"

"You've eaten too many berries," purred Rissa with consumate coolness.

"Stop stalling!" roared Kola. "Where

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is she? What did you do with her?"

Toka took Roya by the arm, guided her swiftly away back along the passage, around the first turn, back into the secret opening to the Topland stairway. The door panel shut behind them, and they were hurrying up the steps to the turn. Just around the turn, Toka gently drew Roya to a stop. She waited close to him as he listened back down the stairway. He could still detect the enraged bellowing of Kola to Rissa, her replies.

"Better go on up to the top," smiled Toka.

"Yes, Toka."

He lent her a helping hand and they made the rest of the ascent in silence.

At the top of the stairway, Toka said, "Might as well sit down and eat."

Roya smiled as she sat on the top step, close beside him. He laid his rocks down beside him on the small landing.

"Now," he grinned at Roya, "the berries. One pack apiece."

Roya had a little smile as she handed him one of the packs. Each tore open a corner of their pack, spilled out a handful, hungrily ate.

"Tell me," urged Toka between chewing and swallowing, "what happened."

Roya briefly explained the Big Snakes' actions; their attacks; Kagi's death; the tossing of Scar Face's body to the Big Snakes; the monsters' still unsated manner; their feverish building of the incline. She left out any mention of her attempts on Kola's life. Still eating, Toka frowned in anxiety.

"Old Walloo," he asked, his troubled eyes searching Roya's face. "Where is he?"

Roya flushed, bowed her head. "I don't know," she murmured.

Toka gave her a sharp look. "And you," he furthered. With a nod he indicated her striking attire.

"I came back up to Kola myself," replied Roya quietly. Her face was averted from Toka's startled, paling features.

"You . . . came back up to Kola . . . yourself?" echoed Toka. Roya—giving herself to Kola! Toka felt the life going out of him.

"Oh, Toka!" flung out Roya, facing him. "They said you were dead! They said—"

"And you believed their lies," interrupted Toka quietly. He stood up.

Roya also stood up, faced him. "But, Toka," she protested, "I didn't know what to believe! I only came back to him to—"

"To get him," finished Toka softly.

Roya stepped back, touched the wall as if for support, eyed him strangely. "Yes, Toka, I did come back to get Kola. But not—"

SANDCLIFF abruptly rocked, shuddered, began a sustained vibrating. Toka had the boulder door open, was intently listening. The screaming of panic was coming from the terraces of Sandcliff, the roaring and rumbling of attacking Big Snakes.

"They've started!" gasped Roya.

Toka heard her only dimly, was out the door, carefully peering around the towering, shielding rock just in front. The lookout on the back wall of the west elevator recess had not left his post but had turned and was looking down in the direction of the attacking Big Snakes. Toka knew all attention would be on the Big Snakes now, even Kola's attention; for it involved the element of self-preservation.

But about to whirl back into the stairway passage, Toka paused. The wind, it was freshening, singing low and strong, growing stronger, rising in voice. Toka took in the southern horizon. The clear blue was retreating under tre-

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mendous spreads of black clouds roiling up, scudding forward with terrific speed toward the sun. Clouds, banks of them, more and more of them, mass upon mass, angrily black, from all along the southern horizon, speeding up toward the zenith, already quarter way up to the brightly burning sun. Blacker and blacker they grew as they swelled and spread in volume. Then as Toka watched in what should have been exultation, the first vicious red-white fangs bit and lashed from the onrushing storm. A moment later, and the deep rumbling of thunder rolled over and echoed on the racing air. But the roaring and attacking of the Big Snakes had not yet diminished. Was their anger so great as to blot out inborn instincts?

But Toka did not pause to ponder the possibilities. This was the moment! The moment for which months of heartbreaking, back-breaking labor and scheming had been laid, the moment when a man's personal disappointments must not, could not, interfere. Toka was only a swiftly functioning automaton as he was back in onto the landing of the stairway passage, the boulder door shut. He whirled to retrieve his rocks. Roya was in front of him. Her face was strangely drawn, pale, anxious.

"Toka!" she breathed hoarsely. "Please! Please!"

HE FOUGHT his face immobile, swooped up his rocks. From his pack of berries he mouthed a full handful, then was shoving past Roya and racing silently down the stairway. He mouthed another handful of berries at the bottom of the stairway, then put his ear against the secret door panel. Clear. He had the door open. He sensed Roya on his heels into the length of passage toward the corridor of Kola's apartment. He whirled on her.

"You'd better keep clear of this!" His voice was low and bitingly cold in its inflection.

"But I want to help too!" pleaded Roya.

"Help who?" rasped Toka sarcastically.

"Oh, Toka!" exclaimed Roya without lifting her voice. "You don't understand! It wasn't the way you think! Let me explain!"

"Pretty alibies will have to wait!" snapped Toka. "Just keep out of my way!" He strode tight-lipped to the corridor door.

He listened for a moment, heard Kola out on the terrace bellowing orders above the swiftly rising howling of the wind, the crashing of thunder. Sandcliff was still rocking, shuddering; then there was an abrupt shift, not in the intensity, but in the rhythm of the rocking and shuddering. Toka's heart lifted, his hand filled with the last of the berries. He paused before mouthing them. Yes, the Big Snakes had left off their attack, were retreating back into the jungle till the storm would pass!

Kola was bellowing orders for those on Twenty-four to enter the court, for those on Twenty-five to get into their apartments and lock the doors. Toka chewed his life-sustaining berries, swallowed and breathed the breath of a hunger-appeased man. He had not planned on being in Kola's apartment at the start; he had not planned on being able to have a pack of berries to start on, but neither had he planned on the Big Snakes being so viciously aroused, their destruction of so much of the first terrace. Yet the blacknesses were more than balanced by the light of hope, by the careful planning of everything basic.

Toka waited grimly, his strength growing within him, his fighting heart coming coolly, ragingly to life.

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CHAPTER L

TOKA heard Kola enter the foyer, slam the door, heard him mutter as he strode toward the side terrace and slam the twin doors to it. Then Kola was striding into the corridor.

"Rissa!" Kola bellowed. "Rissa!"

Her door opened. "Yes?"

"Make yourself useful! Close all the windows!"

Rissa did not reply, but Toka heard her go into the first room. He heard Kola go quickly to his own room, the door of it shut. The stone shutters of the first room's windows slammed, and Rissa came out, went into her own room and there was the muffled sound of other shutters closing.

Toka glanced over his shoulder. Roya was just behind him, her face strangely drawn as she eyed him. His resolution against her weakened. But he turned, had the door open, was silently into the corridor. She followed, the door shut, and Roya and he were stealing swiftly up the corridor and into the main room. The fury of the storm was eerily muffled here, baffled, thwarted. Toka closed the twin doors to the corridor, then put down his rocks. Roya promptly gathered them up, held them ready for him. He hesitated, to give her a long, penetrating glance, then brought out the four coils of rope from under the lounges. He went into the foyer, Roya close behind him, and studied the black stone door to terrace Twenty-five.

The door opened in against the east wall, and probobly had a locking mechanism. It could not be closed from the outside. To open it now would let in a roaring gale, leave an open door, something Kola would instantly investigate. Toka eyed Roya an instant, then, his shoulder insuring the door remaining safely shut, felt about for the release mechanism. He found it; it clicked under his fingers; the door tried to give to the pressing weight of the gale, but Toka braced his legs and pressed his weight and strength tight to the door. He glanced sharply at Roya.

"Can you carry two of these coils of rope?" If both Roya and he might not escape, perhaps one of them could deliver the very necessary rope.

"You'll need time," replied Roya.

"So?" snapped Toka impatiently.

"I'm staying," Roya announced quietly.

Toka felt his face flush hot with the sudden explosion within himself. "He'll kill you now!"

"And when he sees the open door," pointed out Roya, "and orders a search despite the storm?"

TOKA'S mind saw the sense of Roya's remark, but his heart queerly rebelled. He searched for an excuse. "You can't shut this door against this wind!"

"I've eaten water berries," said Roya. "Besides, I can tell him I opened it by accident."

"And when he asks you where you've been?"

"That I'm here will be enough to

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make him stay," said Roya.

In her eyes, the set of her mouth, Toka saw the uselessness of further argument. She held out the rocks to him.

"You better keep them," advised Toka.

"He would be suspicious if he saw them."

"Well, I won't need them," said Toka. "Hide them under a lounge."

Roya whirled back into the main room, hid the rocks under a near lounge, was back, ready.

Toka mentally groaned. Roya . . . even in trickery, faithlessness, he loved her! "I'll be back for you!" he found himself whispering.

But it was as if he no longer existed; she put her hands, too, on the door. Toka's jaw snapped.

Keeping his shoulder pressure on the door, Toka shifted the coils of rope, two on each arm for balance. Then together Roya and he let the door slowly open, so it wouldn't bang. The gale squealed, then spread to a deafening roar. Toka was plunging out into the teeth of it, raced east into the night that filled with viciously licking fangs of red-white light, the night that was snapping and crashing with volley upon volley of thunder.

Roya strained to shut the door. Her feet slipped as the gale tore at her, surged against the door. The twin doors to the corridor burst open.

"Well!" bellowed Kola behind Roya. He strode up, thrust her aside, easily pushed the door to against the gale.

Roya raced silently back into the main room, had the center table between herself and Kola as he strode into the room. He paused, faced her, one of his fists on hip, the other hand idly swinging his great battle-ax. A mocking smile was on his face, an ugly light in his eyes.

CHAPTER LI

TERRACE Twenty-five had been cleared of lounges and tables. The awnings were clapping sharply in the gale, beginning to loosen in sections as wild winds gripped them and strained at them. The first huge drops of rain drove into Toka's face as he raced down the deserted west stairway to terrace Twenty-three.

The door awnings on Twenty-three had been lowered by the oppressed as they had taken refuge against the storm. Toka ripped off the awning-door of the first apartment he came to. The storm snatched it away on an angry roar. Toka ducked into the apartment. It was crowded with cringing forms and apprehensive faces. In a flash of red-white light he saw two of his key men, evidently was seen by them and the others in the main room, for a murmur of hope fought against the raging storm furies. His two men came forward with glad, broad smiles.

"Everybody down to One and Two!" ordered Toka. "Give the word!"

The two men nodded, shouted the order back into the apartment, plunged out after Toka, separated east and west, were aided by the storm as they tore aside the awnings snugged over doorways, shouted the word into apprehensive interiors, brought a fierce surge of hope to sunken hearts.

Still carrying the coils of rope, two on each arm, Toka plunged on down the west stairway to Twenty-two. He saw Nicky and Noola, ever the curious, the unafraid, craning from an uncovered apartment opening. They saw him, raced gladly to his side for orders. He handed each of them two coils of rope.

"Down to One!" he shouted. Further instructions were unnecessary. He was plunging away ahead down the

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west stairway, outdistancing Nicky and Noola. No doubt Nicky and Noola would have had The Plan in motion had they had any way of descending and ascending the first rise. Even the Big Snakes' incline was beyond the use of unequipped men, as a flash of red-white revealed.

The rain was driving in fury now, but behind Toka the word was spreading, the people fighting, fighting with a strength born of new hope, fighting down toward One and Two.

Toka reached terrace Three, raced east toward apartment Seventy-five, plunged in through the foyer. He stopped short in amazement as a red-white lash of light revealed Old Walloo propped against the west wall, unconcernedly sucking on the hollow old goat horn, his back to the vault.

"Old Walloo!" shouted Toka happily, looking down at the old man.

Old Walloo gave Toka only an uninterested, vacant stare.

"The storm!" exulted Toka above the fury of it. "It's here! Just as you said! We're starting!"

Toka felt a cold prickling up and down his spine as Old Walloo only smiled vacantly.

"Old Walloo!" shouted Toka. "What's wrong with you!"

OLD WALLOO only smiled again in childish innocence, and Toka's mind raged. Kola's men! No wonder Roya had—

Fool! And he saw it all now! Roya had gone to One on Twenty-five to try to kill Kola! Toka mentally cursed his own stupidity. Roya—up there with that inhuman snake!

Toka's whole being raged for action, yet he was gentle as he lifted Old Walloo aside to get at the vault. The old man did not protest, just fixed himself again in cross-legged repose and vacantly sucked on the old goat horn. Toka's mind meshed in accurate speed. Old Walloo could not help with the opening of the vault.

Toka was into the foyer, came back with three red clay bowls, all that were left. He took up a position in the northwest corner, reached up and pressed the proper masonry and with his left hand hurled, by the red-white light of the next flash, one bowl at the secondary masonry near the west of the foyer entrance. The bowl crashed, too low. In the next flash, Toka tried again. Too high. Again. The vault in the west wall swung open.

Toka took out the black battle-knife, strapped it on. As he faced Old Walloo his fingers ran swiftly over the familiar engraving on the weapons of his illustrious sire, the Great Tokay.

"Now don't leave this room!" he shouted to Old Walloo. I'll be back!"

Toka plunged out into the storm, down to terrace One, raced west. The storm was raging in full fury, stygian black was a swiftly changing lacework of red-white fire, thunder crashed in salvo upon salvo, the screaming wind drove the rain in walls of drenching water. But the hopeful, the avenging of Sandcliff were already massing on One and Two. They were weak of body, but their strength of spirit and the pack of berries would quickly overcome that.

Toka reached where had been the west ladder. The tree-work of the Big Snakes' incline was obviously too tricky for human feet, so Nicky and Noola had two of the ropes already lashed around stubs of balusters where the west ladder had been. Four other men were lashing the other two ropes to nearby stubs. Toka saw his men were gathered and waiting, impatient as he to be about the job. He peered over the edge of terrace One, saw by a flash that the west ladder was strewn but miraculously intact

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down against the base of the rise. He straightened up, faced his men and the massed of oppressed Sandcliff.

"All right!" his voice rang clear and strong through the crashing of the elements. "You know what we're up to! The strongest of us down the ropes first! The others wait here for berries! You'll be told what to do! Let's go!"

Toka was swiftly over the side and dropping down one of the ropes, his two hundred fifty-odd key men following. In scarcely more than a moment all were gathered around the dangling ropes at the foot of the rise. Toka barked quick orders.

"You four stay here and get the west ladder up again! The other one too if you can!"

THE designated quartet plunged away west toward where lay the west ladder. Toka led the rest of his party at a jog through the storm, over the now-muddy trampled area, toward the rocky upcropping. The lightning struck again and again in red-white tongues, played around Sandcliff in eerie patterns, continually hissed over the valley. The rain bit under the howling force of the wind. The thunder constantly snapped, crashed, rolled and echoed in ground-shaking power.

Toka and party were at the upcropping, catching their breaths. Toka stepped up to the door boulder. The controlling vines had been torn away, probably by the Big Snakes. There were scant hand holds, but Toka and some of his men tried to pull the boulder out by their hands. It budged not the slightest, their hands slipped. Evidently the whole mechanism had been jammed.

Toka waved his men back. As they cleared he took his battle-ax in both hands, flashed it mightily broadheadly against the center of the boulder. The blow rang solid, the boulder cracked its length. Toka swung swiftly, mightily again. Again the blow rang, and the boulder shattered to a heap in the doorway of the cavernous vault. The men leaped forward, clawed the rock away. Toka was into the huge vault.

"Berries first!" he ordered.

The men feverishly began gathering huge armloads of the packs. Toka grasped a pack, ripped it open, held handfuls of berries to hungry mouths of his men before they plunged out and raced back toward Sandcliff. The first men were back before the last left, and soon the relay grew in numbers and bodily strength. As the packs of berries were carried back to Sandcliff, up the now replaced ladders on the west end, and the packs distributed to waiting, grateful hands, more and more of the long-oppressed of Sandcliff were fed and strengthened, whereupon they, too, took their places in the relay.

Toka smiled grimly as the tremendous stock of berries dwindled, as his tattered army mounted in numbers; as that army and its families grew stronger and stronger on pack after pack of berries, as he armed every trusty man with fine black battle-knife and ax, as he watched them swarm back toward Sandcliff in vibrant strength, loaded high with the last packs of berries for reserve stock, the last knives and axes for reserve stock of weapons.

Under the direction of his key men the people of Sandcliff holed up on terraces One and Two, rested and let their starved bodies fully absorb the berries they ate. They roused only to proudly handle their weapons and eat more berries, then rested, waited, regaining the strength that they would need to the very last grain to bring victory.

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Leaving his men in charge, Toka took a pack of berries, bounded up to Three, raced to apartment Seventy-five. Old Walloo was still staring vacantly and sucking the old goat horn. Toka managed an encouraging smile, squatted down in front of the old man, ripped open the pack of berries.

"Come on, Old Walloo!" urged Toka. "Take a handful!"

OLD WALLOO took the old goat horn out of his mouth, held out his hand. Toka poured the hand full. Old Walloo smiled, mouthed the berries. Toka's hopes rose. He smiled at the old man. But Old Walloo only chewed and vacantly eyed him.

Someone suddenly plunged into the foyer of Seventy-five. Toka was up in a whirl of readiness, ax loosely swinging to flash into action. Then Old Lito plunged on into the main room.

Toka smiled, relaxed, squatted again, waved Old Lito to do likewise. He narrowly eyed Old Lito. This old man seemed almost completely recovered of his injuries and weakness, his eyes were alight with the fire of impending battle, as should be Old Walloo's. Old Lito was slightly winded from his recent efforts, though. Toka knew the old friendship between these two old men. Perhaps Old Walloo would show some sign of recognition toward his old crony.

"Hi, you old tramp!" shouted Old Lito through the storm's rage.

Toka's jaw muscles knotted, he bowed his head to hide his disappointment. Old Walloo merely smiled questioningly, without recognition, laid his goat horn between his feet, took the pack of berries from Toka's hand, spilled out a handful, mouthed it, chewed as if alone. He retained the pack, fondled it idly. Old Lito frowned, eyed Toka quizzically.

"What is it?" He jerked his head to Old Walloo.

"Doesn't seem to know anybody! Won't or can't talk!" Toka, too, shook his head. "Kola's men, I guess!" He stood up as Old Lito muttered a curse on Kola and his like. "I've got to be going now!" he told Old Lito.

Old Lito nodded. "Don't worry! I'll watch him! Good luck!"

Toka nodded grateful acknowledgement, plunged out into the raging storm, turned west. His mind raced toward Roya and her position. But he had to let his ragged army fully ready itself. An attack by only half-strong men would mean only bloody defeat at the hands of Kola's always well-fed brutes. Toka knew further that he and his ragged ones had to attack before the storm waned, before the Big Snakes returned to the attack and wiped out all Sandcliff. But Roya, up there in the very center of the danger and rottenness! He could, would risk the chance if only Rok were here to general the attack. Toka plunged on down to Two, met Noola, who was in charge of the second terrace.

"Well?" asked Toka impatiently.

Noola grinned. "Gettin' hard to hold back!"

"Good!"

TOKA plunged on down to One, encountered one of his men with an armload of packs of berries he was distributing. Toka took one, stood unmoved in the fury of the storm, ripped the pack open, began mouthing huge handfuls of the strengthening fruit. The storm had shifted slightly west, but continued unabated. Toka mouthed berries, gorged himself. He

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could feel his strength already high, demanding release in violent action. But he'd need every last grain of strength he could muster when he took on the man he had long ago singled out for himself. Nicky, in charge here on One, came by and stopped.

To Toka's questioning look, he grinned, "Say when, Toka!"

Toka swallowed the last berry, crumpled and threw away the leaf wrapper. He smiled grimly into the storm, then addressed Nicky.

"You and the men waiting here take the rats in the court!" The Plan had been to take the thousand-odd warriors and patrols in their barrack apartments, but Kola and the Big Snakes had unwittingly altered that. "Noola and the men on Two will take Twenty-five!" went on Toka. "I'm taking the hairless snake myself! Pass the word! I'll give you time! I'll signal from Three!"

Nicky nodded, was away. Toka bounded back up to Two, quickly found Noola, repeated the directions to him, bounded on up the west stairway to terrace Three, stood beside the balustrade on the stairway landing, impatiently waiting to give Nicky and Noola time to inform and form the two armies. Already they were gathering at the stairways. The army on terrace One was almost ready, that on terrace Two not quite.

Toka let his eyes sweep out over the valley. The constantly flashing red-white tongues gave it an eerie light. Huge palms swayed low under the punishing of the whipping wind, the crushing weight of drenching rain. Everywhere the vegetation glistened fierily, reflected the flashing light. The Hop was a rolling whirlpool. There were queer shadows everywhere, down in the valley among the lashed vegetation, on the low bare hills far on the other side of the valley, out on the desolate red flatlands that were now a quagmire; queer shadows, taking the shape of wild thoughts of a desperately wishful mind.

Toka saw the two armies were massed ready at the stairways, all eyes waiting upon him. He raised his battle-ax high, swept it down and up in a commanding arc and then himself whirled and plunged away up the stairway. A look over his shoulder showed the first army under Noola swarming up the east and west stairways, Nicky's second army a short clean distance behind. There was not a shout, only grim deadly speed of ascent, glistening black battle-axes easily, expertly held in now strong and avenging hands. Up, up the armies swarmed as Toka bounded on ahead, his mind, his heart, his spirit crying for battle.

IN SCARCELY a handful of moments terrace Twenty was behind Nicky's second army, while two terraces behind were the women and children swarming up with the sustaining reserves of weapons and packs of berries; women and children, near naked, fighting easily upward, unmindful of the fury of the storm, like their men gathering more strength from its very ferocity; women and children to take up the fight if need be, to make successful the attack so long, so carefully, so secretly planned.

Toka was on Kola's projecting front terrace on Twenty-five. Noola and the first army spread swiftly along Twenty-five, a man to the closed door of each apartment. Nicky and the second army were swiftly in position at every door of the court. And every element of the storm seemed suddenly to reach even greater heights of fury as Toka, every eye upon him, raised his battle-ax high, flashed it down with a rallying yell, leaped to Kola's door.

Tatter-clad but now powerful bodies instantly drove chipless black battle-

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axes again and swiftly again in a shattering hail on locked black doors. The doors, of the same rock as the axes, did not crack, but they creaked on their hinges, swiftly loosened in their casings, sagged, crashed inward. With all the fury of the storm, avenging men were surging into the court and apartments, into foulness and filth, a cleansing flood of fighting fury.

But Kola's men, at first caught by the surprise of the attack, promptly rallied and leaped to the counterattack. Powerfully and expertly handled battle-axes hissed in slashing arcs, met and spat vicious sparks. Knives flashed as here and there the fighting closed in. Black knives, now dripped red, were driving again and again to the hilt. Above and through the screaming fury of the storm came men's screams, curses and rallying yells. Blood soon flowed in warm rivers. Gore spilled underfoot in slippery not-yet-dead warmth and smell. But as a man fell, another was there in even greater fury. In the court, on Twenty-five, the battle waged in a furious but indecisive ebb and flow.

But on the battle in One on Twenty-five, on that battle more than anything else now, would the final decision be reached.

CHAPTER LII

A MOCKING smile was on Kola's face, an ugly light in his eyes as he faced Roya across the main room, the huge black center table between them.

"Where have you been?" he rasped.

Roya was seemingly unperturbed. "Just looking around," she smiled.

Kola's eyes narrowed on her as he slowly advanced toward the table. "Where?"

"Oh," tinkled Roya, "here and there."

Never taking his eyes from her, Kola laid his battle-ax on the table. "Why?"

"After all," sparred Roya with an easy laugh, "a girl likes to look over her new home."

Kola was obviously flattered. He grinned loosely, relaxed his suspicion. He edged toward his right along the table. Roya edged opposite. The fury of the storm was a securely barred and muffled giant in the glowing spaciousness of Kola's main room. Kola and Roya maneuvered in a manner that was only seemingly idle.

"One needs amusement during a storm," insinuated Kola as he edged back toward the center of the table.

"I like storms," observed Roya easily, moving to an opposite position. "Especially this storm."

Kola suddenly laughed raucously. Yet his devouring eyes never left Roya. His huge hands rested tensingly on the edge of the table. His huge body tensed; he leaped. Roya was ready, flashed away around the table, had it still between herself and Kola. He'd whirled as he lit, now leaped back to the table, grasped it, hurled it aside. It crashed against the side terrace doors, bounced away. The doors, loosened by the table, banged in and let the storm rage in and fill the room with whipping, breath-taking wind and roaring. Slashing rain sprayed through the doorway, made slippery the black floor.

Kola roared a wild laugh, as if glorying in the storm. He slowly advanced toward Roya as she half-crouched behind a lounge near the foyer. She suddenly straightened up, hurled a rock. Kola easily caught it, with a low laugh hurled it out the side terrace doorway. Roya's quick second rock cracked Kola on the jaw. The sound was clear and sharp above the rage of the storm. But Kola merely roared again in wild laughter, stooped and grasped up the rock,

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fired it out the doorway, faced Roya and mockingly bellowed, "How many more you got there?"

Roya's eyes were fear-wide in her white drawn face as she fired a third and quickly following fourth rock. Kola let them bounce from his massive chest, roared another wild laugh as he grasped up the rocks and rifled them out the doorway. Kola turned and leaped. From wells of desperate strength Roya upended the lounge at him, dodged away. His wild fingers grazed her naked shoulder, then he tripped over the lounge, but was instantly up and leaping after her. She had a chair, hurled it in his face. His left arm warded it. His right hand grasped for her shoulder, missed as she whirled toward the corridor.

RISSA was standing amusedly langorous in the doorway, a glittering black knife point first toward Roya. Roya swerved. Kola's hand closed on her shoulder. She whirled, writhed, clawed, bit her teeth deep into Kola's wrist, into a nerve. His laugh broke off into a muttered curse. Roya jerked free, raced for the side terrace. The gale was against her, and Kola caught her by the shoulder again just as she reached the open doorway. He whirled her back into the room. As she crashed sprawling to the floor, Kola turned and slammed the side terrace doors, threw a lounge against them to hold.

Roya was up and racing into the foyer. Kola bounded after her, caught her before she could even touch the door. He swiftly had her arms behind her back, then with one huge hand he held her helpless by both her wrists, dragged her kicking and half sobbing back into the main room.

Again roaring with wild laughter, Kola retrieved his battle-ax, dragged Roya toward the corridor. Rissa had disappeared. Kola dragged Roya down the corridor to his room, opened the door, forced her into the darkness ahead of him, let the door shut, found the table, laid his ax on it. With his vise-like grip on her wrists, he wrenched Roya to her knees while with the other hand he found the fire holder, uncapped it, lit the two large candles. The eerie flickering of yellow candle light illumined the room. Kola yanked Roya upright, threw her into his huge bed.

Roya instantly bounced off, raced back toward the door. Kola let her vainly fumble for the masonry as he took off his knife, scabbard and belt and threw them onto the table. Roya frantically searched for the door release. Kola stood beside the table, devoured her, a loose smile curling his thick lips, a low laugh in his huge corded throat, his opaque blue eyes burning, his huge hands twitching in ugly anticipation. The candles cast writhing shadows on the walls and ceiling.

There was a chair to Roya's left, the north wall. She darted for it, picked it up, hurled it at Kola. He caught it easily, set it down beside the table. In a frenzy Roya was back clawing for the door catch again. Kola, laughing, slowly advanced. Roya, stark-eyed, promptly darted away to the south wall. Blocking her from the table and candles, Kola let her scramble over his bed and to the west end of the room. She half crouched behind a chair below the shuttered west windows. She waited, trembling, her eyes desperate in her white face, her breath laboring her breasts. With the same low laugh, Kola again slowly advanced.

In a sudden explosion Roya straightened up and threw the chair. Kola only laughed low as he let it crash wide to his left and against the south wall. He was at the foot of his bed now, nothing be-

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tween him and Roya but open floor. As Roya crowded back against the far west wall and under the windows, Kola slowly assumed a half crouch, leaped. Roya dodged, but Kola spun in mid-air, caught her by an arm, yanked her to him. Roya kicked to no avail, rolled her head in frenzy, tried to bite the hot-breathing ugly face bearing down upon hers. She strained vainly against the huge arms that were crushing the breath, all resistance from her body, disordering her scant attire.

Then through the muffled fury of the storm there came a sudden wild yelling and screaming, the sharply vicious smashing of stone upon stone, the unmistakable sounds of battle. Kola let the now unconscious girl slump to the floor as he straightened up, listened intently. Then he was at the table, had his battle-knife strapped on, great battle-ax in hand, the door open, was up the corridor and into the main room as the door to terrace Twenty-five crashed from its hinges and casing.

CHAPTER LIII

AS HIS armies surged to the attack, so Toka leaped to the door of One on Twenty-five. His battle-ax was smashing at it with blinding speed, once, twice, thrice. The fourth blow blasted the door from its hinges and casing and Toka was raging in through the foyer, his eyes black hate, his ax swinging ravenously. His eyes took in the furniture-strewn room, immediately caught Kola who was spraddle-legged and evidently momentarily surprised, in the clear center of the room. Then Kola was snarling and leaping to battle, huge battle-ax whistling in a shimmering arc. Toka came head on, parried the blow with his own great ax. The axes spat sparks of hate, swiftly flashed again, met, crashed, spewed fire between these two men.

Toka's berry-strong muscles writhed and leaped no less than Kola's as the axes continued to furiously flash and hiss, strike and spew sparks, as the fury of the storm raged into the room, made the floor slippery with driving rain, as the storm's red-white tongues gashed their tingling breaths around the room. The two men stood battling in their first flush of fury. The hope of Sandcliff against the death of Sandcliff.

"Where is she?" gritted Toka.

Kola snarled mockingly, only increased the fury of his attack.

Toka strategically gave, and the two maneuvered around the center of the room, flashed their axes with blinding speed as they dodged and weaved, parried and feinted, eyes narrowed. Furniture was smashed to bits by the huge axes. Toka knew the battle could end only in death for one or the other. He knew that Kola realized that also.

"Where is she?" snarled Toka.

"You'll never see her!" roared Kola. He attacked in a sudden rush, his ax screaming.

Toka dodged, caught sight of Rissa, tense in the corridor doorway. Kola was attacking again in an overpowering rush of fury. Toka again parried the screaming ax, dodged away, the side terrace doors to his back, Kola and the room and Rissa in front of him. Kola was rushing again, and Toka's eyes saw a scant-attired blond figure suddenly appear behind Rissa, crash Rissa aside, rush into the room.

"Toka!" Roya screamed as he barely in time parried Kola's rush and dodged toward her.

But Rissa had scrambled up, was leaping also, her eyes black hate, her full red lips snarling, her face writhing in vengeance. In a split moment she had Roya by the hair, was yanking her backward, toward the corridor. Roya

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gasped and fought wildly. Toka sensed Kola's iminence, whirled, reeled backward to the north wall under the fury of the attack. He was hard put. A lesser battle-ax would have cost him his life on the spot.

"Get him, Toka!" screamed Roya.

TOKA'S free hand found an intact chair, grasped it, flailed it at Kola. Kola's mighty battle-ax splattered it in an instant, showered its splinters around the room. But the move had given Toka the instant to leap to Roya's aid. In one movement he tore Rissa away, hurled her into a corner. She crashed onto an overturned lounge, was not more than dazed.

The corridor and passage might be used to retreat by Kola's men in the court. Toka was dancing away from Kola's savage attack, maneuvering along the north wall, drawing Kola away from the foyer—best chance of escape for Roya.

"Out the foyer!" yelled Toka. "Take to the balustrade!"

He had no time to see whether Roya did as ordered. Kola was a cursing, raging giant. His ax screamed in circles as he attacked. Toka braced for the attack, made his own ax scream. The two weapons were a shimmering blur around their wielders' heads, then met in all their fury. There was a splintering snapping, and Kola reeled back for the first time, holding a broken black handle.

Toka swiftly attacked for the kill. But Kola was amazingly away, had the huge stone table in front as a shield that Toka's ax could only vainly scar. Kola was blocking, then was rushing Toka. Toka's foot caught in a piece of furniture. He went down, rolled quickly away. Kola hurled the huge table just as Toka was scrambling up near the side terrace doors. Roya's too-late scream rose above the now waning storm as the table hurtled through the roaring air and struck Toka with terrific force. Toka again reeled down, pain searing up his right arm, and his battle-ax spun silently out the side terrace doorway, apparently out over the balustrade.

"Toka!" screamed Roya from somewhere on the other, the east, side of the room. "Get up! Toka!"

He was up as though shot upright, in fighting balance, knife drawn to meet Kola's knife. The knives glinted in searching flashes, blade against blade as Toka desperately parried Kola's. Then that viciously searching knife of Kola's flashed past, gashed Toka's forearm, but scarcely a drop of blood spilled. Toka, too, was saturated with the strength and healing of the water berries. Toka maneuvered Kola back along the north wall.

"Roya!" yelled Toka. "Out the foyer! Get away!"

As he parried Kola's next rush and managed to slash Kola's arm, Toka was aware of a scuffle somewhere behind him now, somewhere within the room. He ached to know, but Kola was pressing in again. Toka danced away. In a glance he saw Roya and Rissa wrestling near the side terrace doorway. Rissa had a thin black knife. Roya had the wrist of Rissa's knife hand in a desperate grip. Then Toka tore his glance away; Kola was rushing in again. Their knives clashed, spat sprays of angry sparks.

TOKA, trying now to watch Kola and Rissa and Roya, felt himself suddenly tripped by a canny foot. He twisted violently as he fell but felt his left side slashed from shoulder to hip, felt the gash instantly begin healing. But his twisting prevented further cutting by Kola. He was swiftly rolling

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away clear of Kola, leaped up to meet Kola. A dexterous parry of Kola's attack and he was leaping backward—to feel a hot flame of pain sear into his right shoulder from the back and down his arm into his hands and fingers. His muscles convulsed, numbed. His knife clattered to the floor, bounced away into the debris of the room.

Toka waited for Kola's finishing attack. But Kola was standing away across the room, grinning in gory triumph, savoring it, was balancing, cocking his knife arm, had the knife by the point, was throwing it. The knife was a flash, a deadly glitter streaking at Toka. In the split moment of the whole action Toka knew he couldn't dodge that knife; it seemed unswervingly headed straight into his heart.

Then sun-blond hari flashed in front of Toka's eyes a split second ahead of the knife. He heard the knife thud into flesh, and Roya lay limp, crumpled, face up at his feet, Kola's knife hilt stiff from under her front left shoulder above her breast, blood beginning to trickle down from the soft swell of her breast.

If only there were berries at hand! pleaded Toka's thoughts. If only she could eat berries in time! If it already wasn't too late! Berries! But no good to a person unable to chew and swallow them!

Toka never gave a thought to the quirk that kept Kola still. It seemed to Toka as if the storm, as if Kola, as if the sounds of fighting out on Twenty-five and down in the court and out on Twenty-four, were of another world as he dropped to his knees beside Roya, pulled out Kola's knife and rifled it away out the side terrace doorway. He felt for Roya's heartbeat with his right hand. He could feel none. Too late!

The clammy cold within Toka melted, boiled to explosive pressure as fires of vengeance mounted high within him. He slowly raised his head, and as he stood up, untensed, he fixed Kola with a burning gaze that would be extinguished by nothing this side of the death of the murderer.

Never taking his eyes from Kola, Toka automatically felt with his left hand to where Rissa's knife had so treacherously buried. He drew it out, disdainfully threw it over at Rissa's feet.

CHAPTER LIV

TOKA was unaware that out on Twenty-five and in the great court the battle suddenly flowed against his armies under Nicky and Noola. Kola's men, matching their attackers in number, were also long well-fed, gorged on berries. The surprise element once balanced, Kola's men were reckless with fury.

Toka's armies were forced back, foot by bloody foot, back out onto the terraces, out into the full rage of the storm, the tearing wind, the shaking thunder, hissing lightning, drenching rain. Replacements were immediately there for every man of Toka's that fell, but too many were falling. More were needed, more trained fighters. Toka's armies were not entirely of the most expert of fighters. Kola's men were trained, practiced to battle, were cannily generaled by Split Lip and Scar Belly. Nicky and Noola were able; but Toka's armies under them were being slowly but surely forced back.

Anxious glances toward One on Twenty-five went unrewarded. The last best man outside of Toka had been lost in Rok. If the tide of this battle were not turned soon, women and children would be in the front line. They were already preparing.

There was a sudden flurry of excitement on the terraces immediately below

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Twenty-four.

Strangely familiar figures of the dead, eyes blazing, battle cries swelling, were hurrying upward from there.

CHAPTER LV

AS TOKA faced Kola he felt his strength mount to that of all the men in Sandcliff, of all strength given by all the berries ever eaten or to be eaten. He was strangely, sharply aware of every detail now. The storm was suddenly waning fast. Already the blue was swiftly growing on the southern horizon, visible out of the foyer back of Kola. Out on Twenty-five and down on Twenty-four and in the court the battle still raged. To his right, in the side terrace doorway, hand on throat, black eyes wide and staring at him, was Rissa. Directly in front of him, and now past apparent surprise and fascination, was Kola, now snarling and crouching, huge hands twitching in anticipation.

Toka slowly advanced toward the man he knew he could kill with his bare hands. Kola waited, spraddle-legged in his crouch. Toka's fists were loose at his sides as he advanced. He suddenly leaped, his rock-hard fists were a blur as they sawed into Kola's face. But Kola stood, his own huge fists blasted back blow for blow. Toka took. He was now insensate to pain. He stood toe to toe with the mighty Kola, who towered a full head above him, stood toe to toe and pumped his fists in a tireless pistoning, slugged with all his strength, from the very depths of his inexhaustible strength he slugged and was slugged, blow for blow.

But it was Kola, breathing hard, who finally gave, retreated toward the side terrace. Toka grimly, relentlessly crowded after him. Toka was scarcely aware that Rissa had retreated out onto the side terrace ahead of Kola. He knew only that no one, nothing, could stop him till he had killed the man in front of him. Toka was carelessly aware that Rissa was behind him on the terrace, stayed behind him, stayed at the side terrace doorway as Kola retreated up the terrace. Toka sought to crowd Kola into a corner, slug it out. But Kola was a wary fighter, maneuvered smartly, circled, was now retreating back down the terrace.

Kola's eyes had suddenly changed. They no longer had so much of the confident mocking light. Toka's fists bit with even more viciousness. Kola's bit back with even more of their own. But Toka knew that at last the hairless snake was being hurt. Fighting furiously, cannily, maneuvering for a killing opening, they were midway along the terrace. A perfect spot for standing and viewing the landscape. A crazy thought to Toka.

Kola suddenly attacked in a flurry of fists, forced Toka back into the spot, then whirled and was at the gargoyle next to the doorway, was yanking the ridiculous object. Toka, ever so slightly dazed by the suddenness of the move. In reflex he jackknifed, caught one hand to the balustrade as he went over, hung on. Kola was raging to the balustrade, hammering his fingers.

SUDDENLY Kola mouthed a string of curses, left off his hammering of Toka's fingers, whirled away. Toka pulled himself back up over the balustrade, aware that the storm had passed to the north, aware that the angry Big Snakes were regathering from out the jungles in the valley; two were already down below, thwarted from having him. As he swung over the balustrade and lit ready to fight, he saw Kola lift the screaming Rissa high overhead, hurl her out over the balustrade. She hurtled

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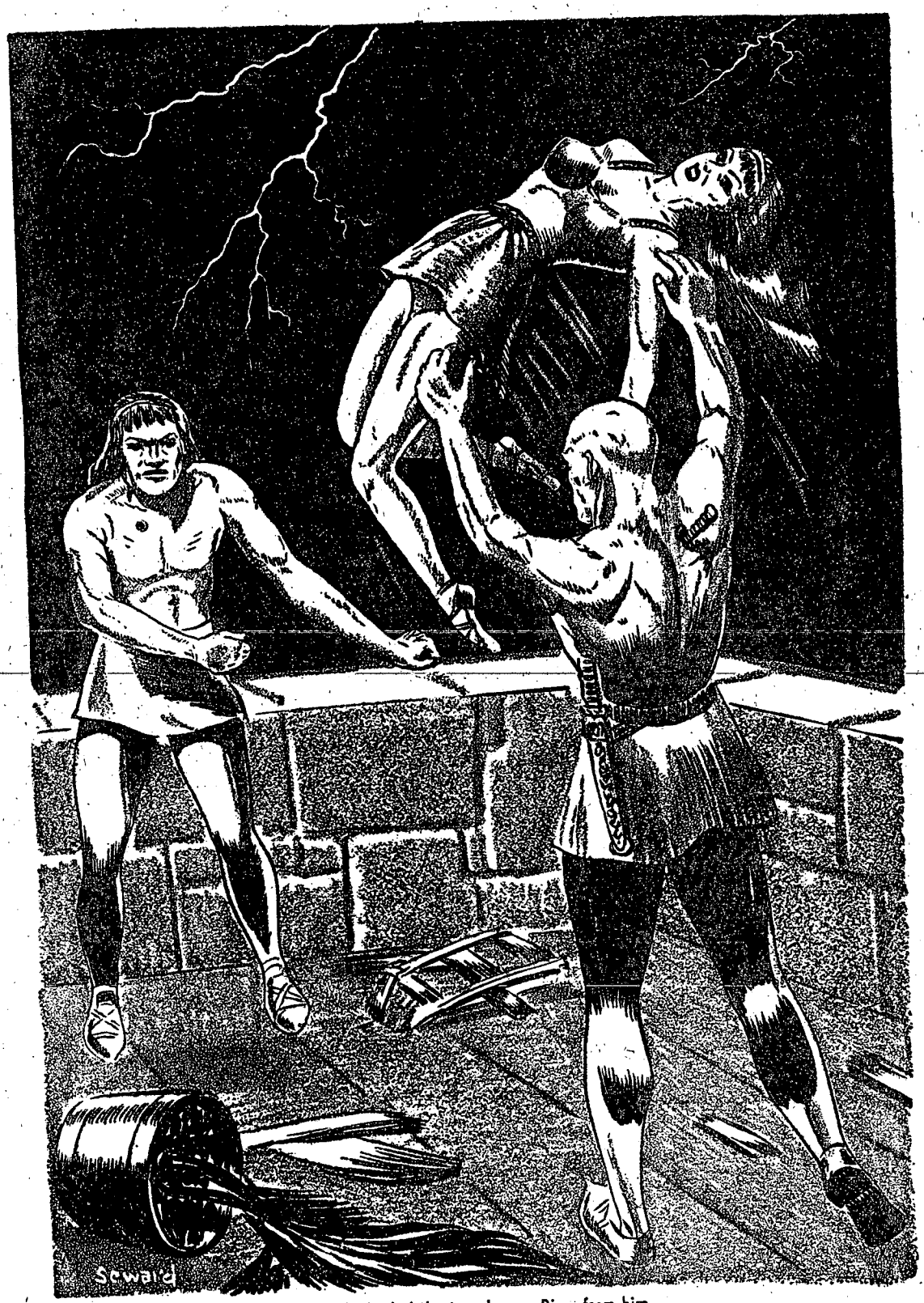

Toka hurled the treacherous Rissa from him

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downward, a fading scream that blended with the sudden roaring of the Big Snakes waiting below.

Toka took Kola in at a glance. Rissa's knife hilt stood out black from Kola's back, near the shoulder. Toka noted the floor stone that had failed to hurl him as it had hurled another to doom; it was perfectly in place. Kola had now drawn Rissa's knife from his shoulder, was preparing to throw.

Toka's hand closed on a potted plant, rifled it. Kola ducked, the knife glittered in flight, seared open Toka's temple as he jerked aside. Toka picked up a lounge, hurled it. Kola dodged. The lounge crashed, careened in bits over the balustrade. Toka ducked as a potted palm whistled past, crashed in back of him. Toka hurled a huge fern, missed. Hurled another, caught Kola squarely on the chest. Kola only grunted, drove a huge potted fern that broke on Toka's hip. Toka staggered and Kola was charging, was upon him. Kola's nose split under Toka's fist. Kola ripped curses as he crashed atop Toka, tried to use his knees foully.

Toka fought for a throat hold as he warded Kola's like maneuver. Then Kola suddenly was standing, holding Toka. Kola swung his superior weight, crashed atop Toka, down onto a lounge. Toka felt the furniture give, snap, splinter into his flesh, grind in as he and Kola rolled their fighting bodies about the floor of the terrace. Broken bits of pottery also cut. But Toka, too, was saturated with more than the power of the water berries.

Potted plants, and trees and furniture not already smashed, crashed down atop them, ground under them, bit, drove, cut into them, but were ignored in the white flaming heat of man-to-man battle.

Kola suddenly strained as Toka shifted grip ever so slightly. Kola was free, scrambling to his feet. Toka was up in a flash, faced Kola some four debris-strewn paces down the terrace. He waited for Kola to make the move.

"All right, rat!" baited Kola. "Why don't you come and get it! Yellow!"

Toka's mind flooded red hot. He closed, fists flying. Kola stepped to meet him. They punished each other now in a terrific slug fest. Features gave, became unrecognizable pulp. Kola seemed built of something indestructible now, evidently drugged to pain, powered to even greater strength, so great was his insane anger. Toka likewise was without feeling; Kola's smashing blows were only spurs to greater effort.

Toka now stood, head down against Kola's hairless head, drove his arms till the blood vessels stood out in throbbing cords, till his rock-hard fists ached from their ceaseless driving into that body in front. Kola's breath came and went in rasping gasps now. Toka felt his own lungs incapable of further breathing, yet they drew in air in great rasping, searing lungfuls, expelled it in dry rasping, fiery gasps. For Toka now there was nothing but Kola and drive those fists, drive them, drive them in a blinding pistoning till there was nothing for them to bite their bloody way into.

Toka was unaware that he and Kola had moved one bit, yet the sun suddenly came a moment into bruise-swollen eyes, battle-blurred eyes. But Toka only drove, drove his fists, drained the last wells of strength from his very depths, drove his fists took Kola's unwincingly, unfeelingly. Then there was nothing in front of him. His fists flailed air.

Toka slowly straightened up, blinked, felt himself swaying, looked around. Through a red blur he saw that he faced the balustrade alone. He heard the rising roaring of Big Snakes far below,

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heard the sudden gnashing of great teeth, a triumphant rumble, then silence, ominous silence.

CHAPTER LVI

TOKA became aware of a feverish babble of voices in the main room behind him, then a quick long stride coming onto the side terrace. Toka whirled, swaying slightly but ready to fight. A tall figure, a familiar figure, clad in tattered goatskin, black battle-ax in hand, was smiling in the doorway.

"Toka!" exclaimed a familiar voice. Then Nicky and Noola and others were crowding around, forcing berries into his hands, urging him to eat. Toka did so automatically.

"All over!" grinned Nicky. "They haven't got an ax or knife among 'em!"

"Got 'em all round up an' under guard in the court!" said Noola. "An' are they a worn-out bunch!—Yammerin' how they will be good!"

But Toka heard only dimly. His eyes spread over the tall one. "Rok!" he gasped, still unbelieving. Toka could feel the berries renewing his spent strength with their healing power.

"You sure cleaned them out!" rasped Rok.

Toka gestured over the balustrade. "Big Snakes—now. But you?"

Nicky and Noola also eyed Rok and grinned quizzically.

"Yeah," urged Nicky, "how did you get back just in time to clean up?"

"Sure picked the right time to get back!" fervently echoed Noola. "'Nother hour an' they'd had us smeared!"

Rok laughed. "Well, when I saw The King was finally going to slam me away yesterday, I naturally relaxed with the blow, flew through the air with the greatest of ease, finally lit, still with my hair full of all those berries we found yesterday. Then what did I find but nearly all the others the Big Snakes had batted down south. Everybody was planning on getting back here, so we all filled up on my berries and hiked back together on the double quick, in time to get in on the end of the show." He gripped Toka's hand. "Good job, Toka!"

Toka only shrugged. He could feel himself swiftly healing, his strength returning in great surges, but he felt no elation, only a killing weight on his soul. He had to tell Rok, take the consequences. "Roya's gone."

"Gone?" gaped Rok. Then Rok laughed. "Why, Roya was inside just a moment ago. Pretty weak, but able to talk plenty."

Toka was into the main room, strode to where solicitous armed men and women with packs of berries were grouped around a lounge. Toka did not see these others as they parted to let him through, he saw only Roya, alive, beautifully alive, lying on a hastily repaired lounge, a cloth bandage on her wound. At the sight of him, she smiled, and all the dark weight was swept from his soul. He dropped to his knees beside her, held her hands fervently in his as he anxiously smiled into her blue eyes. His anxiety flowed away as she continued to smile, even more than smile with her eyes, her mouth.

"Toka," she whispered. "You've won, Toka."

He could not speak, could only hold her hands tighter, swallow with effort.

A THROAT cleared. "Good job, son," said a strong mellow voice above him.

Toka's head shot up. His widening eyes beheld a familiar smiling countenance on which the years, as ever, rested lightly. Toka leaped up.

"Dad!" He embraced his father.

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"The Great Tokay himself!" laughed Rok.

There was easy general laughter, thankful laughter.

"Now where's that rascal Old Walloo?" demanded the Great Tokay.

The general air of relaxation was shattered by a Big Snake roaring, by Sandcliff shuddering. Anxious babbling rose from the terraces, came into One on Twenty-five. All eyes in the room turned to the Great Tokay, but he turned to Toka.

"They're attacking again!" snapped Toka. He whirled to Nicky and Noola. "The back room! The goat's eyes! Both at once! Berries!"

Nicky and Noola handed their axes to Toka and the Great Tokay, were quickly away. Toka smiled reassuringly at Roya. She smiled confidently back. Toka knew the women would take care of her. He mouthed a handful of berries from one of the women, then led the way out onto Twenty-five. In short staccato phrases he explained the cause of the Big Snakes' attack.

"Then Old Walloo is still down there!" cried Rok.

"Unless he's been brought up here with the others!" agreed Toka, knowing the dread that must be chilling Rok.

They were out on the projecting section of Twenty-five now. The awnings of Twenty-five had been blown away, supporting poles stood splintered along the balustrade. A glance over the balustrade revealed the Big Snakes massed around the base, around the incline, which had withstood the rage of the storm. Two huge spike-backs were half up onto One, trying to claw the rest of the way up, others behind them shoving, waiting their turn to go up. The massed others roared encouragement, thumped their great tails. The two spike-backs made a sudden effort, made the first terrace, darted their ugly heads into foyers. Their huge heads burst open the stonework. Other Big Snakes were struggling up onto One, would soon be swarming over Sandcliff.

Nicky and Noola came hurrying out of One on Twenty-five with high armloads of berries.

"Pass them around!" directed Toka. "And if Kola's men want to prove themselves, put them in the front ranks on Twenty-four! We'll make our stand there!"

Nicky and Noola were away on their task.

Toka turned to the Great Tokay. "Take care of Roya."

"Right, Toka."

Rok was plunging down to Seventy-five on Three. Toka took out after him, leaping from balustrade to balustrade, caught up. They plunged past Sixteen, were both leaping down, balustrade to balustrade. They were on Ten when it came: a low, thin, rising sound, weird, tingling the nerves, rising and falling in eerie melody.

TOKA and Rok slowed, paused, beheld the Big Snakes suddenly become silent, look around, strangely docile. Then came a strong old voice from the direction of Seventy-five on Three, Old Lito's familiar expostulation.

"Jumping hoptoads! What you doing, Old Walloo?"

Old Walloo's answer could not be heard. But the strange melody floated on the air again, rising and falling, growing in strength and volume. The Big Snakes smiled, almost peacefully, almost beatifically. The huge spike-backs stretched their long necks up in the direction of Seventy-five on Three.

"Come on!" gasped Rok to Toka. "Hurry! Maybe we can get them out!"

"Wait!" commanded Toka with a staying hand on Rok's impatient arm.

Together they watched the scene.

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The Big Snakes smiled at the two old men who suddenly appeared down there.

"Go on away and play with yourselves!" waved Old Walloo in the Big Snakes' grinning faces. "Go on! Get!"

Toka's jaw dropped as the half dozen Big Snakes obediently turned and slithered back down off terrace One, back down and onto the incline and joined their now equally quiet fellows. Then all the Big Snakes sat down around the base of Sandcliff, whined appealingly up at Old Walloo.

"Well, go on!" snapped Old Lito to Old Walloo. "Play the crazy things a tune on that gadget!"

"Well, shut your blabbering trap so they can hear me!" retorted Old Walloo in typical diversion from dignity.

As Toka watched in wonder, Old Walloo sat himself comfortably on the balustrade of Three, raised the old goat horn to his lips, began playing the melody so fascinating to the Big Snakes. Toka eyed the Big Snakes almost unbelievingly. The huge monsters were dreamily smiling, had their huge eyes shut. The huge bodies and long necks and heads swayed in gentle rhythm to the rising and falling of the notes from Old Walloo's horn. They shivered delightedly at each trilling as Old Walloo gained fluency in his blowing and fingering. He stopped. The Big Snakes clapped their forelimbs, thumped their tails, roared approval. Old Walloo bowed.

"Gramps is still nuts!" groaned Rok.

Old Walloo turned and looked up. His remark was familiarly jocular. "Did you say something about somebody being nuts, Rok?"

Rok thankfully whispered, "Holy hoptoads!"

"He's all right again!" breathed Toka. "But look, the Big Snakes are going away!"

The monsters were wandering down into the valley, began digging out huge sods which they rounded into shape.

"Baseballs!" whooped Toka. "They've got their sense back too!"

Old Walloo was eyeing him sarcastically. "Just who else has got his sense back too, O Great Toka?"

"Everybody!" laughed Toka. "Everybody but me!" As Rok gaped after him, Toka raced up the east stairway to Twenty-five. He burst into One on Twenty-five. The women attending Roya in the lounge looked up.

"The Great Toka wants everybody in the court!" solemnly ordered Toka.

"Yes, Great Toka!" they hurried away.

Toka, grinning, turned to Roya, knelt by her side.

"Faker," smiled Roya.

"Well," grinned Toka, "I had to think of something, didn't I?"

"Or I would have," whispered Roya, drawing him close.

THE END

REMARKABLE BELIEFS

By SANDRA H. WINSLOW

THE war has brought into the limelight the hitherto almost unknown lands and peoples. It is true that most of the populated areas of the earth have been conquered by civilized men and to a certain extent, at first glance, it seems foolish to state that there are any unknown lands and peoples. But actually how much is known, for instance, about the original men, women, and families, who inhabited the Philippine Islands, their common beliefs, their way of looking at life? Everyone is aware of the natural resources which we were able to acquire from those once-distant lands, and now in war-time those materials are important from the military standpoint. And yet we remain almost totally ignorant of the rich folklore, the products of the

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imagination and background of a people different in many, but not in all ways, from the white man of the West.

The Filipino had his own religion. Like the religion of most primitive peoples it contained many of the spirits of nature. Gods dwelt in particular hills, woods and lakes. In their feasts and ceremonies the natives had hymns and prayers to the rain spirit, the sea, the star-god, the good birds, and the winds. On the island of Mindanao which has figured in battle news of a recent date, there could be found devil-worshippers, who, instead of seeking to identify themselves with the good spirits, try to gain the approval of the fiends. In dark and eerie caves, they practice their rites while ugly wood hand-carved figures gaze down upon the weird proceedings. The evil spirits who appeared in the half darkness leaping and screaming, goading the native worshippers to a frenzy, were the priests in disguise.

The Filipino's beliefs about life and death, reincarnation, and the soul are strange when compared with the thoughts of any white man on the subject, be he a zealous religionist or atheist at heart. The Tagbanuas Filipino tears a house down when a death occurs in it, buries the corpse in the woods, and marks the grave with dishes and pots that the deceased person had used while he was alive. These implements were broken. The Tagbanuas believes that a corpse above the ground is liable to be eaten by a vampire. In their minds is a very detailed picture of this fear-inspiring creature. He is in the form of a man with great wings and enormous claws. He tears open the thatched roofs of houses and consumes bodies by means of a long tongue which he thrusts through an opening in the roof.

To the tribe of Tagbanuas there is no heaven in the skies. It seems inconceivable to them for men to ascend to such a great height. When a man dies they believe that he enters a cave that leads into the depths of the earth, and after traveling for a long time he arrives in a chamber where a huge giant is seated. Known as Taliakood, this giant is supposed to be spending most of his leisure time tending a fire which licks at two tree trunks but, strangely enough, never destroys them. The giant questions the newcomer, asks him if he has been good or bad in the world overhead, but the dead man makes no reply. A witness who has lived with him and knows his actions best states the case. Funny as it may sound to the white man, the creature that the Filipino has chosen as a witness in every case is the louse. When the natives were asked what would happen if a man were to die who did not have a louse on his body, they protested that this never happened. The louse, carrying out his duty and having nothing to gain or lose in the venture, reports the conduct of the dead man. If he has been found to be bad, Taliakood throws him into the fire where he is burned to ashes and no longer exists—physically or spiritually. If, on the other hand, he has been good, the giant speeds him on his way to a happy hunting-ground where he can kill animals by the thousands, and where there are all the fruits and vegetables to be found that his appetite craves. Here, also, he finds a house without having to build one for himself, and he is provided with a wife. Usually he is given the deceased wife of some neighbor, although if his own wife is already dead he can have her again.

In this bountiful land everyone is well-off, although the rich, because they had so much on earth, have less of it than the poor. After a period of years the deceased who has made a new home in the next world dies once more and goes to a heaven in a deeper cave. Seven times he dies; each time he goes deeper and becomes happier. Occasionally a good spirit returns to the earth as a dove, and a bad one comes as a goat. Some are doomed to wander the earth forever.

Their superstitions about medicine and healing, and the myths that are centered about them are interesting, indeed! Like our American Indians, the members of the Tagbanuas and Calamianes groups try to heal the sick through the aid of drugs and charms and incantations. They have their medicine man called the "papalyan." Just how one man is selected out of an entire tribe to administer the rites of "medicine man" has always been a question in the white man's mind. The Filipino has a strange set of beliefs which designate the man who is to become the "papalyan." They believe that hidden deep in a green-bowered forest glade is a queer little fellow who has the power of giving to these doctors the art of healing. Sometimes when a native is out walking alone, this little man rushes out and threatens to kill with his spear. If the native turns and runs away he is unworthy of any further attention, but if he should stand his ground and look the little man of the wood in the eye clearly and defiantly, the spear is dropped. He is given a pearl which he is to treasure for the rest of his life. This pearl is never shown to anyone. But it is important in the "art" of healing, for it has been charmed by some supernatural power. Secretly at the patient's bedside the physician examines the gem carefully. If it is clear the physician will prescribe, but if it is dark or begins to look like an ordinary pebble, he gives up the case and informs the family of approaching death. The "drugs" which were in common use consisted of a powder made from animal teeth and bone. Other parts of animals' bodies were also believed to have some healing power.

Almost all of these beliefs have been traded by now to those which tally with the thoughts of the white man. One cannot say that the present-day Filipino trusts his health to the whims of a pearl which he never sees, or his soul to the talkativeness of a louse. But back in the jungle thickets among the few remaining wild tribesmen can be found some who still let superstition and mythology determine their fate.

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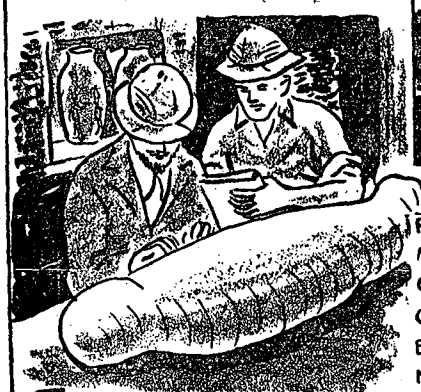
ROMANCE of the ELEMENTS

THE ROBES OF ROMAN EMPERORS WERE DYED WITH COSTLY TYRIAN PURPLE SQUEEZED FROM THE MUREX SHELLFISH. ONE WRITER HINTS DARKLY THAT PERHAPS CRAFTY DYERS OF PHOENICIAN TYRE SOMETIMES USED A TIN SOLUTION TO "FAKE" THE GENUINE COLOR! WE KNOW THAT TIN IN MURIATIC ACID PRODUCES A BRILLIANT PURPLE DYE.

DID THE WORLD'S FIRST TIN SUPPLY COME FROM INDIA? MINERS OF CORNWALL, ENGLAND, EARLY DUG UP TIN ORE WITH OAKEN SHOVELS AND BOXWOOD PICKS, SMELTED IT, AND SOLD IT FIRST TO PHOENICIANS, LATER TO GREEKS. PRIMITIVE BRITONS, IT SEEMS, SOMETIMES TRANSPORTED TIN OVERSEAS IN THEIR SKIN-COVERED CORACLES.



RELATIVELY PURE TIN WAS FOUND IN THE WRAPPINGS OF AN EGYPTIAN MUMMY, "PICKLED" ABOUT 600 B.C. THE USUAL ANCIENT BRONZE FORMULA WAS - NINE PARTS COPPER, ONE PART TIN. HIRAM OF TYRE FASHIONED THE BRASS ORNAMENTS IN SOLOMON'S TEMPLE. CHINESE CRAFTSMEN WORKED BRONZE 3700 YEARS AGO.

IMPERIAL HEADACHE?

THE BASE TIN COINS CIRCULATING AS SILVER IN ROME MUST HAVE BEEN A HEADACHE TO NERO. LITTLE PURE TIN WAS EMPLOYED BY THE ANCIENTS. ROMAN METALSMITHS, HOWEVER, DIPPED COPPER UTENSILS IN MOULTEN TIN TO PROTECT AGAINST CORROSION AND TO MAKE FOOD TASTE BETTER.

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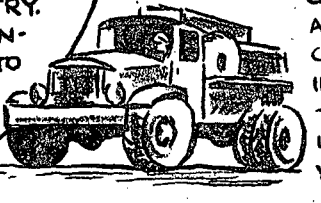
TIN—by ROD RUTH & GORDON McLEAN

FIRST CRUDE TIN CANS WERE CALLED "CANISTERS," DEVELOPED IN 1810 BY DURAND OF ENGLAND TO REPLACE THE GLASS AND POTTERY JARS THAT HAD BEEN USED TO PRESERVE FOOD EVER SINCE FRENCH NICHOLAS APPERT WORKED OUT FOR NAPOLEON A SYSTEM TO KEEP FOOD FRESH ON LONG SEA VOYAGES.

ALTHOUGH WELL-KNOWN, TIN IS REALLY RARER THAN SUCH "RARE" ELEMENTS AS YTTERIUM, ZIRCONIUM, AND CERIUM! BIG MODERN TIN-PRODUCERS HAVE BEEN MALAY, SIAM, CHINA, BOLIVIA. CORNWALL IS NOW AN "ALSO-RAN!"

BOHEMIA PUT UP A STATUE TO A REFUGEE TINMAN FROM CORNWALL WHO EARLY IN THE 1200'S DISCOVERED METAL IN THAT COUNTRY. IN THE 1600'S THE SECRET OF TIN-PLATE-MAKING WAS SMUGGLED INTO ENGLAND. UNTIL THEN, NORTH GERMANY MONOPOLIZED THE BUSINESS.

ENGINE RINGS AND PISTONS ELECTROLYTICALLY COATED WITH TIN RETAIN THEIR LUBRICATING FILMS LONGER. A HIGH PERCENTAGE OF TIN HELPS BEARINGS BATTLE FRICTION. TIN ALLOY BEARINGS WORK UNDER WATER EFFICIENTLY.



TIN is Number 50 in the International Table of Atomic Weights. Its symbol is Sn, its atomic weight is 118.70. Its specific gravity ranges from 7.143 to 7.299. It melts at 230° C, boils at 2,270°. Its specific heat is 0.0552. It is a silvery white metal (slightly tinged with blue in cast form). It is brittle when cold. It is crystalline in structure, and when bent emits what is known as the "tin cry," due to rubbing of crystals against each other.

(Next Issue: THE ROMANCE OF TITANIUM)

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STORIES of the STARS

By Sgt. MORRIS J. STEELE

Great Nebula In Andromeda

This mysterious object in the sky is a universe very similar to our own, and as gigantic as ours

SEE BACK COVER

MYTHOLOGICALLY, Andromeda was the daughter of Cepheus. When Neptune sent the leviathan, Cetus, to ravage Libya, the oracle of Ammon announced that the kingdom could be delivered only if Cepheus would give up his daughter. Accordingly he chained the doomed girl to a rock to await her destruction. But Perseus, returning through the air from the slaying of the Gorgon, Medusa, saw her, rescued her, won her love, and made her his wife.

Andromeda has been perpetuated in the heavens in the constellation bearing her name. Her mother, Cassiopeia, is close by on the north, and her father, Cepheus, not far away, while at her feet is Perseus, her deliverer. Her head rests on the shoulder of Pegasus. In the south, the sea monster who was to have devoured her stretches his ungainly bulk.

Scientifically speaking, the constellation is in right ascension 0 to 2 hours, just south of Cassiopeia. Although it covers a large region in the sky, it contains no really conspicuous stars except, perhaps, Alpheratz. The constellation is notable, however, because in it there is a very remarkable object, the so-called Great Nebula.

On clear and moonless nights, about 15° directly south of Alpha Cassiopeiae, a hazy patch of light can be detected which might easily pass for a fuzzy star or a comet. In the telescope, however, it is seen to be a mass of nebulous mist more than 2° long and nearly 1° wide. Actually, however, it is not composed of the gaseous stuff out of which stars are supposed to be made, but it is in itself an actual galaxy of stars comparable to our own galaxy.

Andromeda, therefore, is known to be one of the most magnificent things encountered in nature. It is what we call a universe, consisting of hundreds of millions of suns, and covering an area as much as 30,000 light years across. Its light is so feeble because of the fact that it is far beyond our galaxy and has been estimated to be 900,000 light years away. (Light travels approximately 186,000 miles per second.)

When you see the Milky way, you are looking at an "edge-on" view of our own galaxy, as seen from somewhere near the edge. Andromeda is a universe almost identical to ours, in shape, size, and area. This gives some concept of the enormity of the cosmos, since we know now that there are over 8,000 visible nebulae in the skies. And in infinity, this enormous distance is what we might term almost a zero part of the whole.

On our back cover this month, the famous fantasy artist, Frank R. Paul, has pictured this great nebula as it might appear from a planet circling the star, Alpheratz, which, although it is a part of the constellation named "Andromeda" is nowhere near the nebula, but is a star in our own galaxy.

Earthmen have been pictured as landing in an ocean of this planet, and they have discovered themselves to be amid a strange form of life indeed. The inhabitants of this world are ephemeral beings who float about in bubbles, which evidently they are able to make and maintain by some weird scientific development.

Judging from the nature of the crystalline "mountains" or "islands" in the background, the water may not be water at all, but some type of chemical which has in its solvent strange elements which crystallize in the form of giant polyhedrous crystals.

Perhaps it is for this reason that the inhabitants have fashioned these bubbles, or globes, so as to protect themselves from their environment, which is the ocean. They cannot live on the crystal islands, because they tend to dissolve and constantly reform in new shapes.

These people form cities and communities by the simple expedient of bringing the bubbles together in masses, in which form they can become cooperative groups and yet maintain an independence which is not enjoyed on our earth. It is obvious that they can penetrate their bubbles, and even travel from bubble to bubble. It may be that the bubbles are common property and that there are a sufficient number of them for any usage desire, if it be as part of a community, or for traveling about on the surface of the ocean, in the air, or under the surface.

With such a simple civilization, it seems evident that the people are not warlike, but on the contrary, are extremely friendly, as evidenced by their welcome reception of our earthmen.

These people may live by a simple assimilation of the foodstuffs in suspension in the ocean, most likely by a form of plankton.

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READER'S PAGE

"BOY, WAS IT EXCITING!"

Sirs:

As this is my first issue of *Fantastic Adventures*, I decided to write a letter. As I was looking through the book I happened to see the Reader's Page and read some of the letters. That is how I got the idea to write this letter.

I just finished the first story. Boy, it was exciting! I sure like those adventurous stories.

"A Grave For Gullible" which is the second story, was perfect except for the last paragraph. The part where he scratched at his horns. What I don't get is where he got his horns from. The two stories about "The Tiger Has A Soul" and "Dr. Zanger's Cats" I don't think were very exciting, but who am I to comment. There are probably many others who like those kind of stories.

Let's say we skip the story "What's New" and talk about the one "It's Raining Dimes". That's all right but not as good as the first two. The last story "The Lotus Temple" a good story and a good illustration; also the illustration on pages 10 and 11 covering the first story is good. Well, that's all for now. I hope I'll be writing again soon.

JOE MORO,
457 Haight Ave.,
Alameda, Calif.

We hope you do, too. We're also glad you liked the stories. We try to give you all the adventure we can.—ED.

TECHNICAL ERRORS

Sirs:

As usual, FA has produced another commendable issue in the July FA. However, Lester Barclay's "The Tiger Has A Soul" causes me to point out some very noticeable technical errors.

On page 76—author Barclay describes an AVG pilot destroying a Japanese bomber with a single burst from his gun. Curtiss Tomahawks of the type used by the Flying Tigers mounted a minimum of six weapons, not a single ordnance piece.

Page 77—he side-slipped and tried for altitude. Slipping incurs a definite loss in altitude, not a gain. The maneuver is popularly used in jockeying for landing position, is executed with one wingtip pointing toward the ground.

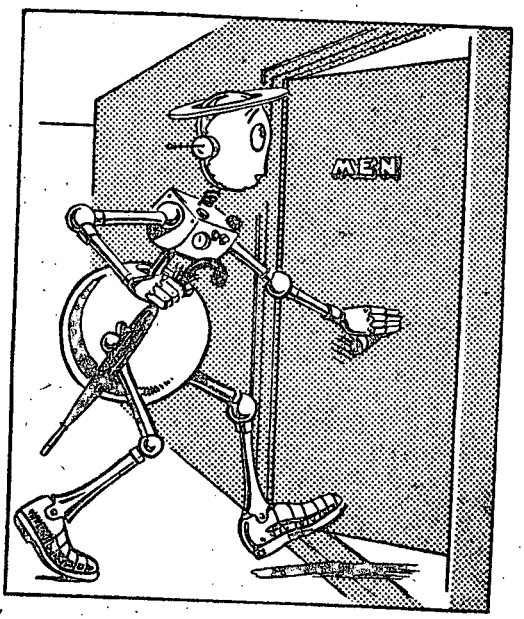
In describing the Baron's fighter plane, Barclay mentions the heavier armor of the machine as compared to the usual Jap fighter types. No machine in the fighter category encountered by the AVG carried *any* armor whatsoever.

In meeting the Baron for the "honorable" sky-duel, Mace approached the enemy machine at 20,000 feet. Battling a Zeke fighter—or any other fighter—in an AVG Tomahawk at 20,000 feet is sheer suicide; one reason why we lost so many Tomahawks at first. The absolute combat operational ceiling of the Tomahawk was 15-16,000 feet.

In the reinforcing of the squadron with P-40Bs, let me point out that the AVG never fought with the P-40B. The Tomahawk fighter of the AVG was the Curtiss P-40C—last of the Tomahawk series. The Kittyhawk fighter used by the AVG in its first model was the P-40E—as the P-40D Kittyhawk never went beyond the limited service state in this country. The P-40B only carried four guns, while the P-40C mounted two .50 calibre and four .30 calibre machine guns, the Kittyhawk six wing .50s.

As for the Jap Zero—there "ain't no such thing." The Mitsubishi and Nakajima S-00 fighters, produced in the Japanese year 2600 which corresponds to our 1940—resulted in the incorrect ZERO title. The AVG never fought Navy fighters, they battled the Mitsubishi Zeke 32, plus older models such as the Mitsubishi S-96 Nate. The S stands for Sentoki, or fighter.

Mace's flying so many times a day, every day, is a definite fallacy. Maintenance of AVG machines was extremely limited—the Tomahawks ac-



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tually fought about once a week for each individual machine. The remainder of the week was spent in patching up the airplanes.

If, as Mace's flying mates seem to indicate, Mace had never met the Baron in their first duel, where had all the bullet holes in his plane come from? The evidence there is indisputable, and Mace did not mention any other aerial conflict at the time.

In reality, the Kittyhawk's speed advantage over the Tomahawk was negligible; actually some 20 mph at the most. The additional horsepower in the P-40E had to cope with heavier equipment, more guns and armor which the Kittyhawk did not have.

The plot of the story was something original, and unusual—I'd like to see more of the same. But kindly have your authors check their information as to their aircraft.

MARTIN CAIDIN,
825 Seventh Ave.,
New York City 19, N.Y.

First, Mr. Caidin, this story was written at the time operations over there were very secret. All we knew was the AVG was fighting Japs. Too, our authors are not aviation experts. As for checking details, the details you mention here were military secrets at the time—are obsolete now—but the story is the thing we want, not technical details. We try to be accurate when we are able to, and when it is ALLOWED! Please consider the limitations of a fiction magazine in time of war!—ED.

LENGTH OF READER'S PAGE

Sirs:

I am a comparatively new reader of yours, having read your magazine for only about six months, but I have read many earlier copies which I borrowed from a friend.

I enjoy the Reader's Page very much, and that is the main reason for my writing this letter. The Reader's Page of the April issue was the shortest I have yet seen, and I thought perhaps this was because there were not enough letters received. I hope to see a longer Reader's Page in the next issue.

I rate the stories in the April issue as follows: 1—Lefty Feep Gets Henpecked; 2—The Singing Skulls; 3—Escape From Doom; 4—The Conqueror; none of the stories were very bad.

Despite criticism, I think Don Wilcox is the best writer you have. I have enjoyed every story of his that I have read, including Taggart's Terrible Turban.

In "Escape From Doom" the illustration on page 49 shows Doren helping Tompkins in the boat, while the story specifically states that he did not help Tompkins into the boat because there was no moon in the story, but there was a bright one in the illustration. Why put illustrations in at all if they do not illustrate anything?

On the whole I think the April issue was a good one.

EUGENE J. FUCHS,
927 Main St.,
Paterson, 3, N. J.

Sometimes a story runs longer than we calculate, and thus the Reader's Page gets compressed. Sometimes our authors list a story as 70,000 words and it turns out to be 75,000. What can we do then—yes, you guessed it, cut the letters rather than the story! We get so many letters it is impossible to print them all. It is never a factor in the length of the Reader's Page. As for that illustration, we discovered too late that the moon was an error, and that the art department had "pepped up" the action. We'll try to be more accurate in the future.—ED.

MALARIA CURE

Sirs:

In reading the letters in the January 1944 issue, I noticed soldier's letter on malaria, which reminded me that at one period in my life I had quite a case of malaria which lasted several months. Mine was of the so-called intermittent type, and gave me no little inconvenience every other day, starting with a chill and going into a fever that left me limp as well as tired out.

Nothing had any effect on it that is of a permanent nature until an old timer gave me the recipe for the remedy used in the early days here. This concoction was to be taken for five days one half hour before the attacks came on. Two doses cured me completely or at least I have never had a chill and fever since taking the first dose. Whether cured or not, I can't say. No medical department will try this or even consider it.

Take ground garden sage and bran in equal amounts, mix thoroughly and put two spoonsful in a glass, pour enough brandy over same to wet sufficiently so that it may be swallowed.

The first dose stopped the chill and fever for that day. When the symptoms recurred in two days, another dose stopped all further effects of the malaria. Have never had it since and that is thirty-six years ago.

Have enjoyed reading *Fantastic Adventures* ever since it first appeared. Also *Amazing Stories* for many years. I find many stories uninteresting in both books, but that is due to my own tastes and very seldom to the author's ability or lack of it. I notice that many readers do like the stories which I dislike, so it must be my own taste that is at fault.

B. T. STEVENS, SR.,
P. O. Box 331,
Antioch, Calif.

Your recipe is interesting, and we wonder why medical science does not consider it. Sometimes the simple remedies of simple folk have a very solid basis, tested by many centuries of use. If we had malaria, we'd try it anyway!—ED.

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LOST CIVILIZATIONS

All over the earth there are mysterious remains of Earth's vanished peoples!

High on a cliff wall at Klamath Falls, Oregon, stretching for a full mile, are huge six-foot symbols carved into solid rock. The race that carved them has vanished utterly from the Earth. Who were they, where did they come from, where did they disappear?

A human skeleton 18 feet tall has been unearthed in a Klamath Falls cave.

Translations of the writings hint this lost race was a colony of the continent Pan, sunk 24000 years ago.

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STORIES OF THE STARS . . . ANDROMEDA

This constellation is noted for its great nebula, one of the most spectacular in all the heavens. Its major star is Alpheratz. **(See page 176 for details)**

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